Inside the city of fear

By: DERWIN PEREIRA

Mister, Mister, please help my mummy,' an Iraqi child begged DERWIN PEREIRA. He recounts life in the Middle East as the war raged, and Baghdad now

THE man with the Kalashnikov rifle was smiling as we approached a roadblock of mounds of sand. Wearing a black thoub with a checked kaffiyeh headgear that exposed just his eyes, he beckoned us to stop.

There were two other men with him, but they were seated in a battered red Chevrolet by the roadside.

We were in the middle of no-man's land on the desert highway, near the town of Ramadi, some 200 km from Baghdad.

We were melting in the early afternoon heat of 38 deg C.

He pointed the gun at the back windscreen of the seven-year-old white Ford I had rented to get to Iraq.

'Aatene flousak ya agneb ya waghed,' he shouted in Arabic.

Mario, my fixer who was seated in the backseat, sweat brimming on his forehead, translated this in a hurry: 'I want your money, you bastard of a foreigner.'

Our driver, Selemen Said, a 54-year-old Palestinian who could not resist taking a shot of Arabic cognac – or 'diesel' as it is known in the local lingo here – every three hours during our journey, looked as if he was going to slow down.

'What are you doing?' I screamed. 'Go, go.'

For us, the next 10 seconds made all the difference.

Selemen put his foot down as the car screeched and swerved alarmingly past the block. This was followed immediately by a burst of gunfire behind us.

They missed us.

M1A1 Abrams pose for a photo under the "Hands of Victory" in Grand Festivities Square, Baghdad, Iraq.

Thank God, I thought, that these militia bandits are so badly trained they can't even aim straight.

We got to Baghdad three hours later, only to be greeted with more gunfire and explosions thundering from a distance.

We had reached the city of fear.

My dramatic entry into Iraq was the culmination of a six-week odyssey in the Middle East that saw me hopping around the region – several times each to Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan – before ending up in Baghdad.

Before leaving, I got myself books on the Middle East, Saddam Hussein and Iraq by Fouad Ajami, Kenneth Pollack and Con Coughlin just to get a grip on the psychology of the Iraqi leader, and the culture and politics of the region.

But none could match the first-hand experience I got from visiting these countries and reporting from them.

The Arab world, I discovered, is not a monolithic whole.

It is a mosaic.

(March 8-12; April 4-10)

KUWAIT is a country of first-world amenities and third-world efficiency.

The airport retailers offer George Of The Jungle DVDs and cosmetics by Christian Dior. The loudspeakers blast a pan-flute Muzak version of Lionel Ritchie's Say You, Say Me.

Kuwait was my first stop in the Persian Gulf because it was important in the grand scheme of things. It was the launching pad for some 200,000 American and British troops into Iraq.

I spent most of my time at the Hilton Resort, the closest thing to command and journalism central in the city.

The resort is a five-star abode that abuts the Persian Gulf. It is an ideal Americanised refuge, what some foreign correspondents call 'McArabia'.

The Hilton boasts a Starbucks and a Pizza Express. At its high-end retail emporiums, you can buy boutique items such as gourmet kitchen knives and tweezers with attached magnifying glass.

But most importantly, it housed the media centre managed by the United States military.

There were some 2,000 journalists in the city, most of them American. The rest were from Japan, China, India and Europe. I was the only Singaporean reporter there.

The major American TV networks, CNN, Fox, NBC and ABC, had each deployed up to 100 reporters, cameramen and staff, to cover the war. Each reporter was equipped with bulletproof jackets that cost US$2,500 (S$4,300), satellite phones and the latest in laptop technology.

Money, or bhakshesh, was the operating medium. NBC's expense, for example, was more than US$1 million a day.

I was on a budget of US$1,000 daily, and this covered hotel expenses too.

The Americans had spoiled the market. Some were paying up to US$400 per day for anyone prepared to be an interpreter. In addition, they dished out another US$200 for someone to arrange interviews and US$300 more for a driver and a four-wheel-drive Mitsubishi Pajero or Land Cruiser.

The figure doubled if these locals were to follow them into Iraq. Some, like CNN, even brought in armed guards – through an international security agency – for each reporter going into Iraq.

I managed to get someone on the lower end of the scale. He offered me a 'package deal' of US$500 daily for everything.

Getting the Arab viewpoint was one side of the equation. The other important part was America's spin on things. But they seemed reluctant to share it unless you were an American journalist.

The US did not seem to realise that it was in its interest to build world opinion through media from other countries.

At this micro-level, it became so clear why American diplomacy failed to build an international coalition against Iraq.

For most reporters, the story was in one of two places: in Baghdad that was impossible to get in, or in the desert, embedded with the US military. But many balked at the notion of being so controlled.

The Pentagon offered The Straits Times an embedment with the elite 101st Airborne Division, which eventually headed to North Iraq.

I wanted to take it up, but not for the entire war given that I had wanted to cover the Middle East as a whole, not one particular country.

Major Trey Cate, the 101st public affairs officer, then promised a five-day attachment. But closer to the date, he cancelled it citing 'poor weather conditions'.

He passed the buck to a Major Max Bloomingfeld, but he was never free to discuss the matter. The media centre was no help either. Its standard reply was: 'We are not in charge of the press.'

A short, pot-bellied private at the counter passed me some 10 numbers to call. His bottomline was simple: 'Don't bother me, bother them.' But none of those manning the telephones offered any help.

Like most other non-American reporters struggling to get into the loop, I decided to improvise when I visited Kuwait again three weeks later.

I wanted to visit either Umm Qasr or Basra, one of the first areas to be 'liberated'.

I dropped my male fixer, Anwar Mohamed, and employed Ghanweh, an ex-Kuwait Airlines flight stewardess of Lebanese-Australian origin.

Now, no man could say no to Ghanweh's natural good looks, charm and that Australian twang, not even the private at the media centre, whose eyes lit up every time she appeared before him.

He would end the conversation with: 'I'll be here for you all day and night.'

Within 12 hours, he had put my name – and Ghanweh's – on a list to Umm Qasr.

QATAR

(March 12-18; March 27-April 1)

NO SUCH luck in Qatar.

The US Central Command ran an even tighter ship.

I spent almost three days working out the logistics to get both a Qatari press pass and US accreditation.

A Japanese correspondent told me before I arrived that there are 'two worlds' in the media centre at Qatar – 'one for the Americans and the other for the rest of the world'.

I found out why.

Smack in the middle of the rectangular space are rows of tables and chairs where reporters from all over the world typed away on their laptops. The space is cramped. In front are three TV screens tuned to CNN, BBC and Fox.

On both the left and right side are special rooms for the media, especially the major US networks and newspapers.

The briefing room was at the back of the press centre. The front two rows were reserved for the American press.

The news conferences were dominated by the American networks, with journalists asking soft questions of the 'what would you like to tell the American people about how well our troops are doing' variety.

Some in the US media also went overboard with the patriotic routine. Journalists began using the royal pronoun 'we' while referring to US troops marching into Baghdad.

Professionally, the challenge was to decipher fact from fiction.

Sometimes, it was difficult to tell who was telling the truth. The Arab media sought to glorify the violence. The Americans sought to sanitise it.

JORDAN

(March 19-27, April 2-4, April 10-11)

TAREQ AYYOUB, a journalist from Al-Jazeera, was a friend I had never met.

He died after a US missile crashed into his office in downtown Baghdad on April 8.

I got to know him two months ago through another Al-Jazeera reporter, Othman Al-Battriri, who is based in Jakarta.

I still remember my first conversation with Tareq. He gave me an earful about US and Israeli involvement in the region and the prospect of war.

'They are colonialists,' he said in his baritone. 'They take over other people's land for their own benefit.'

Such views stemmed from his background. Tareq was a Jordanian of Palestinian origin.

During the war, Al-Jazeera had based him for about a month in the town of Ruweished along the Jordan-Iraq border before deploying him at the eleventh hour to Baghdad.

But from the border, in between meeting his deadlines and keeping in touch with his wife Bima, he was also on the line every day for almost a week with his fixers in Amman to get me a visa to Baghdad.

He knew he would pull it off. 'Don't worry my friend,' he would tell me. 'You will get it.'

True to his word, I did get my pass to Baghdad on March 19, the eve of war.

But I did not go in then because my editors decided against it for my safety.

When I told him this, Tareq seemed rather pleased.

'Saddam won't kill you. The Americans will kill you with their not-so-smart bombs,' he warned me.

How ironic, I thought then.

I was in Kuwait when I learnt of his death by phone from Othman.

I switched on to the Al-Jazeera channel and saw Tareq for the first time: in a bulletproof vest crouched behind a metre-high wall of sand bags on the rooftop of his Baghdad office just before his tragic death.

Tareq was seriously hurt in the missile attack. The station aired footage of him being taken away for treatment in a car belonging to rival network Abu Dhabi. He died of his wounds.

Tareq was 34 and had a 14-month-old daughter.

If only I had met him earlier. We had planned to get together for Turkish coffee at the end of the war at the Inter-Continental, where most of the hacks hang out in Amman.

But such is war.

My fixer in Jordan was 27-year-old Mudhabhar Youseef. Nicknamed Mario – a name an ex-girlfriend gave him – he had a habbit of inviting me for coffee, sometimes knocking on my door as many as five times a day.

Jordan was a microcosm of the Arab world and a hotchpotch of different Arabic groups from Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon.

Looking a wee bit like someone from Bahrain helped me blend into the crowd.

It was in Jordan that I learnt most about Arab culture, and discovered that it shared some traits with Indonesia, where I have been based since 1997.

The symbol of the Muslim East is the crescent moon – a wide, soft, ambiguous arc. The analogy is apt.

Life in Arab societies always moves in ambiguous semicircles, and there was always some way to cushion failure with rhetoric and enable the worst of enemies to sit down and have tea together.

Interviews with any Arab were never easy. Answers were never in black and white, and there were always confusing qualifiers like 'We hate Saddam and we want him out, but we like Iraq and hate war'.

Jordan was the best place for journalists to cross into Iraq, or so we thought.

After weeks of waiting, I decided to move into Iraq. The logistics were mind-boggling. I needed a driver and a fixer, both of whom must be prepared to risk their lives.

Prices were rising by the day. A car and driver that cost US$800 before the war was now US$2,000 for a single trip. Fixers were asking US$500 a day, plus living allowances.

But Mario said: 'You are asking me to do a job that might kill me. I have every right to ask for that amount. And by the way, do you know CNN is paying a lot more?'

Most foreign correspondents had little choice but to accept their conditions. I packed my gear and we left at midnight. Mario had wanted to bring his handgun for protection but I rejected it as being too dangerous. I didn't want us to be caught in a gun battle.

At 3 am on April 12, we reached Jordan's Al-Karamiah border.

All three of us – me, Mario and driver Selemen – stopped at a dingy grocery shop to buy chocolate wafers, Kraft cheddar cheese, biscuits and bottles of Pepsi and mineral water.

With some trepidation, we drove another five minutes before crossing into the Al-Terebel border in Iraq.

'Welcome to free Iraq,' a US soldier greeted us as he let us through.

He also warned us to be careful.

BAGHDAD

(April 12 – present)

BAGHDAD was about 550 km and a nine-hour drive from the border.

There was a sense of peace as we drove through the wee hours of the morning. It was cool and the dark landscape outside was steeped in silence.

Sunrise changed everything. The sun blazed and the temperature picked up. We passed rocks, saltbush and grey earth. They were far from the picturesque rolling sand hills one normally associates with deserts.

In front of us, lines of yellow dust snaked across the macadam road. Soon, the dust entered our Ford through the chinks in the vehicle.

We passed four more checkpoints manned by the US military and at least eight roadblocks of sand mounds.

The roadblocks caused us some concern. At each one we passed, there were children and men waiting to ask for money or food.

Then came the attack by the bandits. We later learnt they had tried to attack other journalists too.

Baghdad was packed when we arrived at about 5 pm. It was as if a sluice gate had opened. Thousands thronged the streets and cars hooted mindlessly.

Almost everywhere I turned, I saw images of Saddam Hussein. But most had been defaced.

Baghdad did not exactly resemble a moon landscape, but sufficient damage had been done to snuff out its basic infrastructure.

I saw small bomb craters in the middle of roads. Some streets were lined with the carcasses of cars and Iraqi tanks, and burnt out buildings that were targeted during the coalition bombing raids.

Blasts had destroyed and pockmarked several buildings. The streets and fences were strewn with glass and debris, and trash lay piled up on pavements.

Iraq appeared to be suffering from arteriosclerosis. On the surface, the basic structure remained unchanged despite the indelible marks left by the bombings. But the country's vital functions were clearly atrophying. Many parts of the country were without water, electricity and communications. Water and food were in shortage.

The other Iraqi towns I visited, such as Umm Qasr, Ramidi and Abu Ghraib, were no different from what I saw in Baghdad -hungry children running up to your car, extending skinny arms and shouting for food.

'Mister, mister, please help my mummy,' a child in Basra had begged me earlier. I didn't know what to do. I gave him US$5 and he ran away.

The desperation of the people was matched by the condition of the capital city.

In Baghdad, I saw flat-roofed and breezeblock houses falling apart. But in most cases, the damage was not from the recent fighting. It was clear that the Iraqis had been neglected for years by Saddam's regime.

The United Nation's oil-for-food programme had been generating around US$50 million a day based on Iraq's oil exports in the months before the war. Clearly, little of that found its way to the people.

After a rather depressing tour of the city, we went to the 17-storey Palestine hotel where most of the foreign journalists had based themselves.

The receptionist smiled when I asked for a room: 'Sorry Mister, we are full. Come back next month.'

Together with Mario, I dragged my luggage and walked the streets of Paradise Square for two hours looking for a place to stay.

At one point, an American soldier approached Mario for a bottle of mineral water. He thought we were peddlars.

Eventually, we found a hotel, just two minutes away from the Palestine actually, but we had to pay a bhakshesh of US$200.

Our rooms at the Andalus Residence had everything – TV, air-conditioner, refrigerator, stove and power points. But barely any of it worked. Neither did the lift.

The hotel operated a generator that worked between 1 and 4 in the afternoon and from 8 at night to 3 in the morning.

I could only file my stories when there was electricity, which meant within that narrow time frame when the generators were working and, at times, much to my chagrin, they did not.

Communication was also a nightmare. Since there were no phone lines or faxes, everything revolved around the satellite phone. But this worked only in certain parts of the capital and given that there were some 2,000 journalists in Baghdad, the line was almost always busy.

Food was another scarce commodity in Iraq. Middle East food is delicious and I had my fare share of hummus, felafel, fuul and shwarma in the other countries.

But in Baghdad, it was baked beans, cucumber salad, kameg bread and a fried egg every night. Being a cheese lover, I treated myself to a slice of the Kraft cheddar we had brought along.

Booze, like in other Persian Gulf countries, was problematic because it is officially unavailable. People were selling beer but not in large quantities and most of it was taken up by the soldiers.

Some journalists coming in from Kuwait, where booze is banned, brought in amber spirits in a Listerine bottle and clear spirits in a mineral water bottle. For those with money, Iraqi whisky – Dirble and Bremier Dewais – could be found in the black market.

Reporting from Baghdad after the coalition troops moved in was difficult because there was no media centre.

There was no authoritative body that reporters could check out news stories and no authoritative version of reality to either accept or refute.

As a journalist, I learnt that it was best to take a little ray of red from here and little ray of blue, yellow and green from there to paint, in story form, the picture that I thought approximated reality.

Capturing that reality was made harder by how there was an informal curfew after 7.30 pm. Movement within the city was restricted and, as a result, most journalists hung out at the Palestine Hotel for the latest rumours.

Others followed US military convoys to cover the news. But I preferred going alone with Mario and our 36-year-old Iraqi driver Hathem Ejam. (Selemen headed back to Jordan after dropping us in Baghdad).

We got to cover a lot more and develop a better sense of the ground.

Not being attached with the American military did have its drawbacks. Unlike embedded journalists, we did not have access to areas like palaces and underground bunkers.

There were also risks we had to bear. I remember getting into a big fight with Mario and Hathem when I wanted to take a picture of myself by a statue of Saddam in the Al-Zawar park near the city. I was surprised to find the statue still intact.

But both argued that it was too dangerous because a US Apache helicopter might appear from nowhere to blow it to pieces. I laughed. We took the picture eventually.

The next day, when we drove past the park, I saw that the statue was still on its massive plinth. But it was now bullet-ridden.

How right my friends had been.

On another occasion, we nearly sneaked into Saddam's Republican Palace, but were stopped by an American soldier.

'If you are from Fox News, come in,' he shouted. 'If not, go home.'

Hathem could not resist saying after this incident: 'Mister, you shouldn't feel so bad. Imagine what it feels like for Iraqis who do not have the freedom to move around on their own soil. It's worse.

'Everywhere they go, American soldiers tell them to go back home. But Iraq is our home. We should be telling these soldiers to go away.'

For people like Hathem, they have nothing left.

American cruise missiles destroyed his house a month ago. 'I went out to work one day and came back to find that I lost everything I owned,' he said.

There is sorrow. Still, he and others I met are also pinning all their hopes on the Americans saving Iraq.

Like the country, the people seem to be beginning to wear down.

The widescale plundering of museums, hospitals, shops and houses that followed the US occupation has done little to build their confidence.

I had embarked on my Middle East journey so sure that the situation in Iraq was etched in black and white – Saddam had to be got rid of at all cost.

But after six weeks, my stand has softened.

When I witness the tears and fears and apprehensions of the Iraqis who have lost their families and homes during the bombings, I am better able to appreciate that, in war, there are nuances.

Washington was justified in toppling a despotic regime that bled its people for 30 years.

But the Americans must also realise that they have but just a tiny window of opportunity to deliver on the promise that they will not turn their backs on the Iraqis.

When I see how US soldiers deal with ordinary Iraqis – speaking in English and in long sentences – it seems to me that the Americans do not have a cultural appreciation of the country they are now in.

The US has found itself a nice perch in the Middle East neighbourhood, in the centre of the world's largest oil producing land. That position comes with a great deal of responsibility.

The faster it rebuilds the country, the more likely the Iraqis will support its future presence.

If the Americans flounder, the geopolitical significance will be far-reaching: it will trigger a wave of resentment not just in Iraq, but the wider Middle East too.

The region has seen conquest and re-conquest over more than 2,000 years. The Arab world is latent with people wanting to settle old scores. They will emerge if the US does not discharge its duties properly.

Every night that I have been here, I would do two things before I sleep: I would read the Bible that I had brought along, and I would look at my Singapore passport.

One of my fixers in Kuwait had said to me that I was so lucky to have a country. He doesn't have a nationality.

Having travelled through the region and having witnessed the precarious lives of people here, I feel, yes, so lucky.

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