

Southtown Article # 16 Traveling in Iraq

Chaplains from around Iraq met this past week in Baghdad. Getting there was more of a challenge than I anticipated. You don't just hop in your car and drive the 350 miles. You don't particularly want to jump in a Humvee and join a convoy either. Humvees weren't made to carry passengers, certainly not for a nine to fourteen hour trip. You can't call up United or Delta airlines and make reservations. You can, however, call up the British (Royal Air Force) and see if they will let you ride with them from Basrah to Baghdad. If that fails you can travel to Kuwait in a convoy, and wait around an Army base to see if a space opens up on a U.S. C-130 cargo plane. This is an unattractive option because you can easily wait four or five days.

My travel plans weren't going so well. It looked like I might not make it to Baghdad after all. Out of the blue someone offered to see if I could catch a ride with the two star general who was flying to Baghdad International Airport (formerly Sadaam Hussein International Airport.) The general's aide graciously agreed. I strapped myself into one of the three waiting helicopters quietly hoping it was not the one the general was going to be riding in. I wasn't looking forward to making small talk with him even though he has a reputation of being a truly decent guy. I found out what seat he would normally sit in and sat as far away as possible. We ended up in the same helo. He nodded his head and said "Chaplain." I nodded mine and said, "General." The rotors started spinning and before you knew it, and soon it was too loud for conversation.

We flew low and fast over the hot sands of southern Iraq and Kuwait. I know it was an optical illusion, but it looked as if we were flying so low you could jump out of the helicopter and gently land on the sand below. Upon landing at Ali Al Salem Air Force Base, we walked directly to a waiting C-130. I pretended I knew what I was doing and walked smartly with an "I'm with him" expression on my face. It worked. No one bothers you if they think you are with a general.

The C-130 is a Humvee equivalent of an airplane. Passengers are an afterthought. There are no seats as you might imagine as in a commercial aircraft. It was designed to haul large amounts of cargo. Passengers, if there are any; sit on fold down, red nylon "benches." They do not face forward but follow the length of the plane. This makes flying more adventurous because as you take off and land, the passengers shift from side to side and often end up on each other's lap.

I give the General credit. He didn't travel using a more comfortable aircraft. He was squished among us like a regular soldier. As we waited the half hour or so before the plane took off the heat began to build. I regretted not taking a bottle of water with me. The thermometer I carry with me (to remind myself how miserable I should be) read 100 degrees. Of course we were wearing our body armor and helmet which probably makes it feel another ten or fifteen degrees warmer. As I looked to the floor there was a pool of sweat directly below my nose.

Mercifully, the ramp at the rear of the aircraft began to close. The props started spinning and most importantly, the air conditioning was turned on. The flight lasted about 90 minutes. It was much too long as far as I was concerned. The air conditioning brought the temperature down to a chilly 95 degrees. Although, I have to say, that made a big difference. I took off my body armor vest as soon as they allowed. I was amazed that most of the soldiers kept theirs on. Either they were more afraid of dying than I (a theory I quickly dismissed) or they didn't mind the heat (also, hard to imagine) or they were just plain tougher than I was (the most likely scenario).

In a combat environment, you don't land a plane like you would normally with a nice even descent. Instead you make what's known as a tactical landing. To limit the chance of getting shot down the pilot flies the plane in a corkscrew direction. He makes sharp turns and steep dives over the airport to allow the plane to lose altitude as quickly as possible over controlled airspace.

I've flown hundreds of times. I actually enjoy a little turbulence. It adds spice to an otherwise dull trip. Tactical landings, however, are an entirely different matter. As the plane dropped and rolled my stomach felt like it changed placed with my throat. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to keep my lunch in my digestive tract. But sooner than I thought, we landed.

The rear ramp dropped. We climbed past the cargo and exited the plane. Welcome to Baghdad, I thought. I hope the conference is as much fun as it was just getting there.

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