



Photo courtesy of the author

Trash

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There isn't any moral to this story, but it's true. Tim O'Brien taught me that. There aren't any hidden messages or subtle points I'm trying to make with imagery or symbolism. This is a story about trash, and about a boy, and an Iraqi dog, and how I spent some of my time in Baghdad in 2007. It's a story about some of the things I think about when I take out my trash or play with my dogs or my boys or when I think about Iraq.

Trash took up lots of my time in Iraq. Let me explain. In the early-middle part of the war while I was in Baghdad on my second deployment, our leadership was desperate for positive metrics. We were in the "long hard slog," to quote Donald Rumsfeld. Problem was, no one above the rank of Colonel knew what that really meant. Our most senior leaders hadn't figured out the type of enemy we were really fighting or how we should fight him. If they had, word had not gotten out.

As it turned out, we had quite a few different enemies, and each required a different strategy, but more on that later. In an attempt to wrap their heads around something that they could measure (and thus use to both show progress to the President and Congress) and harass subordinate units about,

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we toiled at fixing SWEaT (Sewers Water Electricity and Trash.) The logic was, if I remember correctly, that if the Iraqis had electricity, they'd stay inside in the A/C and watch TV instead of fight Americans. Water is self-explanatory. I guess trash worked its way in, either because of IEDs or our western distaste for trash in the street. Sewers were there for our western sensibility as well or maybe just because WEaT would have been dumb.

Down on the ground we were fighting both counter-terror and counterinsurgency fights, and in our spare time we filled in colored bubble charts (on Power Point of course) on how much electricity a neighborhood got that week, if there was trash on the street, or if the city water had run that day. We learned it was easier, and safer, to call most areas "amber" (not good, not bad) and only take the Generals to the rich neighborhoods when they came down to visit. Those neighborhoods all had generators so the lights worked. They had generators because the electricity hadn't worked when Saddam was in power either. They didn't have trash because they were rich and paid someone to haul it a few streets over. You get the picture.

Trash piles were also where the enemy could hide IEDs. Once the war really got going the enemy was often more sophisticated than that, but we still had to be careful. There were still some big bombs hidden in the trash and the random dead dog or donkey we had to pass on our way to work might explode. Unless someone was a newbie or a Rear Echelon Mother F... (REMF), we wouldn't fall for those most of the time.

Don't get me wrong. I did more than track trash, but no field grade officer who spent time in Baghdad during the war could escape talking about trash at some point. I had lots of positive experiences in Iraq despite my requirement to track trash. I spent almost three years of my life there and most of that time was spent working with some great people, American and Iraqi, and doing things other than shooting or fighting or filling in bubble charts about trash.

In fact, fighting a counterinsurgency, at least in Iraq, was more about thinking, talking, drinking tea, and eating in order to build relationships than anything else. Imagine trying to run for Prom King at a new school, only the other Prom King candidates have guns and bombs they can use from time to time if it suits them, and they know the other kids better than you. In this instance, you can easily see how it helps to open your wallet, and it pays to make as many friends as you can really fast. Of course, you still have to fill in Power Point bubble charts about trash as you go.

This tour was also when the sectarian violence was bad. Americans have a hard time conceptualizing what "sectarian violence" means. One way to describe the level of hatred the Shia and Sunni descended into in 2007 is to describe the bodies we'd find. When we were out checking on sewage or trash, or going to meetings, we'd often find bodies dumped on the street and next to the trash piles.

I remember finding this kid one day. I'd guess that he was probably thirteen or fourteen because he wasn't shaving yet. We'd been on a routine patrol with the TAC, and we just happened to be some of the first Americans who drove by his body. Typically, when we found bodies we'd check them out, gather some data, take some pictures for our reports, and then have the Iraqi police pick them up and haul them away.

The boy was probably from a Sunni family, and he'd been kidnapped by the Shia militia, most likely Jaish al-Mahdi (aka JAM, aka the Mahdi Army, aka the guys with Iranian backing.) That was what typically happened in our area (given the demographics.) He'd been badly beaten up like a lot of them were. The bottoms of his feet were bruised, his ribs were bruised, and probably broken (from being

hung from the ceiling and beaten), and he had black eyes. He'd been shot in the forehead with a pistol, which was also a JAM trademark (by shooting their victims in the face JAM militiamen could ensure their victims saw it coming.) The worst part was his hands, and this is how you know what kind of degenerates we were dealing with. His hands had been drilled through with a power drill and bolted together, as if in the prayer position. Locals told us that the Shia would sometimes do this and call the victim's parents. They wanted the parents to hear the screams, and then taunt them over their son's unanswered prayers for help. The bodies would be dumped in the trash as a final insult.

Some days or weeks before or after we found the boy with his hands bolted together, we were on a combined clearing operation. The Army, in its wisdom, in addition to measuring SWEaT, had decided that the strategy of "Clear, Hold, Build" literally meant CLEAR every building in Baghdad. That meant we were also engaged in the daily drudgery of literally sending soldiers (U.S. or Iraqi) into every building in Baghdad. Dozens of units were doing this every day. It gave us a chance to talk to people about sewage, water, electricity, trash, or bodies while we searched their houses. Those are the orders we had, issued by the higher headquarters we had, and that's fodder for another story or two.

I was a Squadron Operations Officer then, and I spent my days with the Tactical Command Post (TAC) roaming Baghdad with my boss. What this really meant is that I spent hours walking in the middle of masses of Iraqi soldiers, tracking our progress, coordinating between groups of American Soldiers who were herding cats and reacting to the infrequent discovery of a cache, an IED, or a short gunfight. I'd also take notes about sewage, water, electricity, and trash (sometimes) or harass our troop commanders about the same. I'm not going to lie—95% of the time it was just hot, miserable, and boring work in heavy body armor. Some days I'd just make up colors for the SWEaT chart based on what I vaguely remembered from the search or what the last guy had reported. Most of my charts were just emailed off into the matrix, and I never heard back about them.

We were close to one of the big slaughter house and butcher districts on this particular day. We'd walked through there a few times before. It was gross. I mean gross, in every way you can imagine. The trash here was piles of animal parts and the sewage was mostly coagulating pools of sheep blood. The dogs and flies loved it. No one else did. I think I marked those bubble charts as red (red means "bad" or "poor").

The Iraqis had herds of sheep penned in old buildings next to the slaughter house. The slaughter house was open air and fairly brutal. No OSHA or PETA in Iraq. The next sheep in line got to watch his buddy in front of him being turned into chunks of mutton with a carving knife.

On an unrelated side note, the next time you think your job sucks, imagine being the guy who squeezes the crap out of recently slaughtered sheep intestines, washes the empty intestine out, and then hangs them up to dry. All day, in Middle East heat, that's your job. Strip the contents of sheep intestines into a big bucket by hand, and then repeat. Think about that. Guess your job doesn't sound that bad now?

I was walking with my normal posse of radio operators and security personnel. We were surrounded by Iraqi soldiers half stepping through clearing operations, which they despised, believed was a waste of time, and over which I was attempting to exert some measure of control for my boss.

I don't know why I noticed the dog, but I did. It wasn't necessarily the dog itself I saw first. I saw its eye. I don't know how to explain how I saw it, other than to tell you it was the phenomenon of eye to eye contact. I realized that I'd made eye contact with something alive in the trash pile. I had to look twice. It was a small dog, probably a puppy, but impossible to tell for sure. It was partially buried in the

trash but in a manner as if it had been pressed into wet clay on its side. One side of the dog, in perfect profile, was exposed from the trash. At first it didn't seem possible that the animal was alive. All I saw was bone structure covered by skin. The dog couldn't move, not even its nose or rib cage moved when it breathed. All that moved was its eye. That single black eye locked onto mine and followed my every move. It didn't look away or blink.

I've got a soft spot for dogs. This dog's circumstances were kind of shitty. I could tell the dog knew, that I knew, it was alive. I knelt for a closer look. All that moved was the eye, the rest of the dog was paralyzed, pitiful, and buried in an Iraqi trash heap. I knew it needed my help. I could see that it wanted me to end its misery. Don't ask me how, I could just tell as we looked into each other's eyes. I told it that I'd take care of it. I think the dog realized that I was going to end its misery, and I could see a sense of relief in its little black eye.

Normally I'd have shot it, but I was surrounded by jumpy Iraqis and U.S. soldiers worried about snipers. A random shot would have started pandemonium. We'd take cover, and the Iraqis would initiate a "death blossom." There was a good chance they'd shoot one of us when they did it. I thought about cutting its throat, but I believed that might put it in more pain before it died. I was going to crush its skull with my boot, but honestly, I felt a little barbaric contemplating that. I also didn't want my interpreter to think I was a savage: stomping an injured dog to death isn't very touchy feely. Remember, we were there to win hearts and minds, I think.

I found a concrete block on the sidewalk. "Sorry buddy," I said, "I don't know how you ended up in this world of shit but I can see you need some help." I swear it looked relieved. I crushed its little skull with the block, and then arranged the block to cover it in the hopes that the other dogs wouldn't eat it. I don't know why I thought that. I guess my western brain just thought a dead dog should get buried.

After that I moved up to the next building and we kept clearing. Shit happens in life, in war, or in war stories, and you keep on moving. They don't roll the credits after ninety minutes, and you don't get to go home. You do have to go fill out some Power Point slides after the operation though.

Years later, I thought about this story as I wrote it all down. There still isn't a moral (if you were wondering.) It's just a real story and a few thoughts about trash and a confused war effort and human depravity and a random dog down on its luck and a young Infantry Major. Stuff just happens sometimes, and we are there to see it. Then you move on. I don't remember a single thing about that unremarkable day or mission other than the dog I found, killed, and wrote about in my journal that night. I can still remember everything about the look in that poor pup's eye just before I killed it, and then left it in the trash where I found it.