

Waiting in Baghdad

By Chris Kleim

It has been a long and bloody war for both the Americans and the Iraqis. With the Americans closing in Baghdad, there is even less hope of holding the country for the Iraqis. Even with the enormous odds against them, the Iraqis still fight on with occasional suicide bombings of American positions and the sneak attacks during American convoy movements. However, when a major battle breaks out the Americans always win due to their superior firepower.

Muhammad has just arrived by truck to the front lines from the training camps. As he is handed weapons to help position in the trenches he sees hundreds of soldiers from trucks and filling the trenches. While he watches them assume their positions in the trenches, he sees Ibriham, a friend who he had known all of his life. When Ibriham sees Muhammad, they run towards each other and hug in joy. Ibriham asks Muhammad where he has been at in the last three years. Muhammad says that he has married a beautiful woman and they have opened a rug shop in downtown Baghdad. Then Muhammad returns the question and Ibriham says that he has been just trying to get by, working odd jobs for people. Muhammad tells Ibriham that he can work at his shop when the war is over.

The two happy men begin working to place the few weapons available for defending Baghdad against the Americans. As the troops continue to make preparations, even more soldiers keep arriving at the sandy trenches. Curious to see who is coming, Muhammad and Ibriham look up at the new faces. They hear one man saying how important it is to fight for Iraq and Muslims everywhere. The man who is arousing the men catches Ibriham's eye. He asks Muhammad if this man looks familiar. Muhammad says that he looks like their old friend, but he is not sure. However, both realize that he indeed is Mustapha. They then call to him and catches his attention. Soon three happy childhood friends are united once more.

Muhammad tells where Ibriham and himself had been and then asks Mustapha about his whereabouts for the last four years. Mustapha says that he left home to become an imam. When Ibriham asks why he came to fight, Mustapha says that it was just as

important to worship Allah as it is to fight for his country. So then Mustapha asks why Ibriham came. Ibriham replies, that he wanted to see what army life was like and with all of the battles going on he would defiantly get some action. Suddenly, Muhammad starts crying, and talks about how his brother Jarmund was killed when the Americans bombed the no-fly zone in the southern part of Iraq two years ago. Muhammad says that he enlisted to get revenge on the American dogs for his dead brother. Mustapha says that he will say a prayer for his dead brother and ask Allah that Muhammad should get his revenge.

While the three friends are talking an officer comes around to each trench to make sure that they are being filled properly with the weapons. When Ibriham notices the officer, he tells the other men to get working. As they work, the men talk about their wives and girlfriends. Muhammad tells Mustapha about his rug shop and his wonderful wife who is soon to have a baby and Ibriham says that he has a girlfriend who he wants to marry after the war is over. Mustapha then says that he has no time for women in his life with his religious studies. When Muhammad asks Mustapha why he wants to become an imam, Mustapha says that he wants to follow the path of the Prophet.

Soon all of the weapons are in place and the men are allowed to rest inside the trench bunkers. As they relax, Mustapha asks Muhammad if he is afraid to die. He replies that he will have failed his brother if he dies without killing Americans, but he is not really afraid of dying itself. Mustapha says that war is such a waste because so many good people die for a useless cause. Ibriham says that he does not want to die because he would leave his soon to be wife alone and she would have nothing left. Mustapha says that dying is a way of life and there is no way to get around it so there should be no fear of it.

Some soldiers came into each trench bunker carrying pamphlets that an American plane had dropped earlier that day. The messages warned the soldiers to surrender on such and such a date. The soldiers took this a sign as to when the attack would come soon. On this particular pamphlet the main article was about how the Americans were going to help the Iraqis once the war was over with food and medicines. Muhammad then said that all of these claims were lies because if they were going to help the Iraqi people then they would not be killing them. Ibriham pulls out his canteen and

hands it to each of his friends as a toast to stop the Americans reign of destruction. After the toast they went outside to see if anything is happening yet. Just as they stepped out of their bunker, two American fighter planes flew overhead and dropped their bombs on one of the trenches.

Through all of the explosions, soldiers managed to assume their posts in time to shoot down one of the planes and damage the other. However, the Iraqi counter-attack came to late; twenty men lay dead and many others were wounded. Ibrahim took this as a sign of trouble because if they are bombing now, the rest of the strike force was sure to come. Anticipating another attack, all of the soldiers were ordered to man their places inside the trenches and be ready for a second attack.

Within ten minutes, four Iraqi tanks came to the trenches to support the soldiers defend against the American tanks. Soon there were hundreds of blips on the radar screen; the Americans had arrived. The Iraqis knew they stood little chance against the oncoming Americans, but they were determined to hold their ground. As soon as the American tanks became visible the Iraqi tanks opened fire on the Americans, destroying two of their tanks but now artillery cannons started shooting and instantly two of the Iraqi tanks lay smoldering in flames. By now the American artillery cannons were within range of the trench guns and they started shooting. However unless the Iraqis could destroy the artillery they were sitting ducks to the oncoming fire. One after another the Iraqi tanks were destroyed and now some of the trenches were being blown up too. Quickly the Iraqis had lost a good majority of their troops.

Over the commotion, the officer in charge calls a retreat to the cliff bunker overlooking a ravine the tanks would have to drive through. The cliff bunker was dug out of the side of a steep hillside many days earlier and now would be tested for strength and camouflage. As the men retreated, the artillery cannons still fired. One blast killed the officer and three other men, blowing their bodies up in the air like dolls. Mustapha turned around to see the men die and quietly said a prayer for them as he ran to the cliff bunker. When they reached the bunker the American tanks were just within firing distance. There were many men with RPGs from the trenches who were getting ready to fire at the tanks. Other soldiers were prepared to throw grenades and homemade Molotov cocktails at the tanks.

The RPGs destroyed five tanks and the grenades and Molotov cocktails only wrecked two others. However, with the bunker revealed, the rest of the American tanks began to fire upon it. The explosions from the tanks blew most of the bunker up but a few men managed to survive. The soldiers picked up their dead comrades RPGs and fired them at the tanks. They destroyed three more American tanks, but the other ones returned fire, this time completely destroying the bunker. While this was happening, Mustapha tried to leave the bunker but saw Ibriham lying on the ground with rocks covering his body. He stopped to help his friend, but Mustapha discovered that Ibriham was dead. With sadness he said another prayer for his old friend and then tried to find Muhammad in the rubble. Muhammad was alive but one of his legs was missing and the other one was cut badly, and Muhammad did not know what was going on. Muhammad looked up at Mustapha and said that he felt a funny tingling in his legs but could not see what was wrong. Mustapha did not know whether to tell him that he was missing a leg. He said nothing as he took a rag from his clothes and rapped it around Muhammad's stump and dragged him outside. As he got near the exit he saw four other soldiers waiting, but none of them were leaving. Mustapha asked them why they were not getting out of this broken bunker. They told him to be quiet because American troops were looking around the area and they thought they would be shot on sight.

Mustapha's heart went into his throat as he knew they had no chance of defending themselves against the Americans in the bunker. It was then that Muhammad woke up and could feel the pain in its entirety. He began to cry out and quickly the other men had to cover his mouth so they would not be revealed. As Mustapha lay there thinking about how he lost Ibriham and maybe even Muhammad, he began to cry as he realized that he himself might not make it back home. He prayed to Allah that he might survive with Muhammad and the other men. The next sound he heard was of people moving outside of the bunker, people not speaking Arabic but English. All of the people inside the bunker became silent and overtaken with fear. Mustapha began to forget that he was not afraid of death because he was becoming scared too.

Suddenly the Americans outside began yelling something that none of the Iraqis could understand. Mustapha remembered just then about the pamphlets. Could this be the help that the Americans promised, he thought. Or was it just a trick to get them to reveal

themselves for death or torture. He was caught between yelling or staying quiet, he did not know what to do that would save him and his comrades.

Mustapha decided to stay quiet because he thought it would be better to have an Iraqi doctor fix Muhammad instead of an American doctor. He then prayed to Allah again to have the Americans leave soon so that they too could leave.

This was the last thing that Mustapha thought before seeing a round object being thrown into the bunker, along with fire spewing from an American flamethrower. By the time the grenade exploded, the Iraqi soldiers were already dead from the flames. A couple of minutes later, two planes flew overhead and dropped their bombs which burst into flames burning all traces of the dead Iraqis and their trenches.

As the smoke cleared, there was no trace of the hundreds of Iraqi and American lives that had been lost at the trenches and canyon guarding Baghdad.