

## Through Darkest Iraq with Gun and Cobra

*A month of war through the night-vision goggles of a Marine AH-1W SuperCobra pilot.*

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*By Story and photographs by James Cox*



***CH-46Es glow in a view through night-vision goggles aboard the flight deck of the USS Saipan. (James Cox)***

**A**ILY JOURNAL: DURING THE WAR WITH IRAQ, I kept an informal journal of my experiences for my family. Sometimes I didn't write for days, either because of the tempo of operations, or because of the sheer boredom. Some of the events that I wrote about rated one or two words—enough to jog my memory later. Others took a paragraph to capture. My method was haphazard: As I had thoughts, I wrote them down. The recollections are based solely on my perspective. My point of view was that of a U.S. Marine, assigned to serve as a helicopter squadron operations officer, flight leader, and AH-1W SuperCobra pilot. The following account is based on that journal.

On March 18, 2003, two days prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, my unit—Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 269, which consisted of 18 AH-1W SuperCobras (we call them Snakes), nine UH-1N Hueys, and 323 Marines out of Jacksonville, North Carolina—moved about half of our aircraft into Kuwait from the USS Saipan, an amphibious assault ship that was our home at sea. I was designated the division leader for a four-Snake flight that was tasked with destroying three Iraqi border posts. We moved ashore so we could react more quickly to the rapidly changing and confusing timeline for the coming battle's opening phases.

I had never been so nervous as I was flying off the boat that day. This was my first combat mission, and as we flew across the teal waters of the Persian Gulf toward Kuwait, I thought about my children. I feared them being left fatherless, and I begged God for strength.

For two days at a clandestine airfield inside Kuwait, we went through the details of our mission, studied target photos, and rehearsed. My copilot, Kujo, sat on his cot for hours on end with his eyes closed, pantomiming the hand and finger movements he would use to fire the Cobra's missiles. Even the lightest breeze stirred up a lot of powdery sand in this arid area, and in winds of 10 knots or more, visibility was quickly down to almost nothing.

On the morning of March 20, 2003, rumors circulated that the Coalition had begun combat operations with missile strikes. It all seemed dream-like, but reality hit as I was walking to my tent. There was a loud roar from the sky, and I looked up. The noise got louder, and I saw a missile flash past the camp—a Chinese-made Iraqi Seersucker heading toward Kuwait City. The air raid sirens began to growl, and we spent the whole day running back and forth between the tents and our bunkers while wearing chemical suits and gas masks. The tension was draining me, and I still had a mission to fly.

The missile scare added to the confusion of sporadic communication and conflicting information. We'd been planning all along to launch the attack at night, when the Iraqis couldn't see us. But maintenance crews needed time to prepare the aircraft, and ordnance needed to be loaded. We sat in a tent with a radio close by and our Cobras only about 100 yards away. No less than five times we got an order—"GO RIGHT NOW!"—only to have it canceled. On a couple of occasions, we started out to the aircraft with our gear, and once we even strapped in and started to crank engines. My stomach was tied in knots all day long, but around dinnertime we finally got the word to launch, and this time it stuck.

The winds had been picking up all day, and visibility was down to less than a half-mile. My flight was supposed to lead the others out of the airfield, but in the confusion, another flight departed ahead of us. Panicky radio calls were made so that we wouldn't have a midair collision. At some point, we flipped down our night-vision goggles. The NVGs amplify even extremely low ambient light, but with reduced visibility and no moon, it was the darkest night I'd ever flown in.

I'd been a Marine for almost 15 years. I'd been flying Cobras since 1990, and I had over 2,500 flight hours and over 600 NVG hours. But this was dark.

Seat-cushion-clenched-in-your-butt dark. The desert was devoid of detail, and I had no depth perception. Imagine scuba diving in a pool of mud—no sense of up or down or of motion relative to anything. Visibility was about a quarter of a mile, and we couldn't see obstacles until we were right on top of them. I just missed a 100-foot radio tower. I could feel the panic welling in my throat as my inner ear seemed to tumble with vertigo.

Eventually we slowed to about 50 mph, just groping along, like driving a car in thick fog. We hadn't even met the enemy and the mission was already nerve-wracking.

Flying north along Highway 80, our flight reached the grid coordinates marking the point where we would split up. The first two Snakes, with me in the lead, turned east to a position where we would fire our first rounds. The second section headed west. At the Iraq border, Kujo began to work the forward-looking infrared (FLIR) sensor to locate the target. It seemed like it

was taking him forever. Looking down to ensure that no one was trying to sneak up under us to shoot us down, I saw a Kuwaiti family outside their farmhouse, looking up and watching the war unfold around them.

Kujo finally located the border post. Three missiles away. Border post destroyed. Thank God that's over.

After struggling through the pitch black back to our base in Kuwait, a flight that should have taken 10 minutes but lasted more like 45, we finally landed. As I climbed out of the cockpit, my legs were shaking—not exactly a sign of manly courage. I thought I was the only one experiencing such intense fear until I spoke to the other pilots. To a man, each was ghost white. Finally drained of adrenaline, we made our way back to the tents.

But we didn't sleep a wink the whole night. Every time we'd lie down, the air raid siren would start howling again, and we'd trudge back to the bunkers. Just after first light, we launched from Kuwait to head back to the Saipan. I was punchy from lack of sleep. Safely aboard, I stumbled across the flight deck and down to the ready room. As I set my gear down in one of the chairs, the Marine Aircraft Group commander walked up to me and gave me a comforting pat. I felt the tears well in my eyes. He told me how proud he was of all of us. With a huge lump in my throat, all I could manage to say was "Skipper, it was so goddamned dark out there." I thought that if the rest of the war was going to be like that first night, I wouldn't survive.

Early in the afternoon of March 24, my two-Snake section launched from the ship and proceeded to the Iraq city of Nasiriyah. Marine ground units had entered the city days earlier and seen the bloodiest action of the war so far. This was my first daytime flight. Night flying in the desert was difficult, but daylight left us feeling naked and exposed. We made our way around the edge of the city, and I radioed a Marine ground unit on the city's north side. As we approached, we were directed to engage an enemy mortar position along a riverbank. We rolled in to attack with rockets and guns, and Kujo slewed the cannon, strafing up and down a trench. I fired rockets, which cracked with loud explosions. While we were orbiting over friendly units, Kujo had spotted Iraqi artillery to the west. We got clearance from the forward air controller and began firing missiles.

On one of the holding orbits, I noticed two burned-out hulks. I'd heard that the Marines had lost two armored personnel carriers in an ambush the day before, and some men had died. We raced back for fuel and ammunition, then returned to join up with the Marines as they starting moving north.

My section scoured the fields, ditches, and small enclaves beside the road as we escorted the convoy. A few kilometers to the north, I spotted some Iraqi soldiers waiting in ambush in an irrigation ditch. Hidden in the trench and undetected by the convoy, they began to move toward the road. I called the FAC and he cleared me to engage. The Iraqis were now within 50 meters of the convoy. From 500 feet, I lowered the nose, and with my left hand reached down to the weapon switches and selected the cannon to shoot fixed forward. Looking through the

glowing symbols of the transparent head-up display, I lined the gun piper up on the Iraqi closest to me. In that split second, I realized that until this moment I had destroyed things—buildings, vehicles, weapons—but I hadn't shot at a man.

A million thoughts raced through my mind. Guilt. Fear. Sorrow. And, finally, anger that these men were trying to kill my brother Marines. I pulled the trigger.

After a refuel and reload, we set out after sunset to where the Marine unit had stopped for the night. Like the pioneers with their covered wagons in the old west, the Marines had their tanks and armored vehicles in a tightly coiled formation, with each vehicle assigned a sector of fire. As we approached, I could see that they were engaged in a firefight, with fire spewing out in every direction: TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles, 25-millimeter chain gun, M-1 tank main gun, and heavy machine gun fire. Orbiting at 150 feet, we were so low that the machine gun rounds made our teeth rattle. Every couple of minutes, the FAC gave me a rollout heading, and I'd either ripple a pod of rockets or blast away with the cannon. Every clearance added the words "danger close"—meaning that the fire is close to friendlies. It was chaos.

A British GR1 Tornado jet checked in with the FAC to work with us. The FAC was having trouble talking the jet's crew onto the target. Finally the FAC identified the target by using a large fire as a reference, and the Tornado began its target run. As the jet passed over the city of Nasiriyah, all hell broke loose. Large-caliber anti-aircraft artillery (triple-A) and SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) streaked through the sky in every direction. The 100-millimeter triple-A rounds arced up and exploded, looking as though they were moving in slow motion.

This was the first time we'd been shot at, and it was absolutely terrifying. I nearly froze at the controls. I thought I'd known fear before, but I've never been as scared as I was that night, and the sensation was more intense than any I'd ever felt before. Evading the gunfire, we flew back to the rear area for more fuel and ammunition. We flew one more sortie, which was just as chaotic and violent as the previous mission. After flying for nearly 14 hours straight, we headed back to Jalibah to spend the night.

We then endured a period of three days of sandstorms that grounded us. After it cleared, we were tasked with supporting the British forces around Basrah, in southern Iraq. We began screening the north of the city for possible Iraqi ambushes, staying well clear of the built-up areas. We began to scour the outskirts of Basrah with our sensors when Kujo observed Iraqi military equipment in bunkers in the desert outside of the town. We had just begun to size up the weapons cache when Kujo noticed an anti-aircraft gun with a large pile of ammunition at the ready. Standing off from the target, we engaged it with a TOW missile. Rolling off target, we saw Russian-made T-62 heavy tanks hidden in larger bunkers. Kujo began to engage the tanks with Hellfire guided missiles. When each tank was hit, debris would spray off the hull, followed by a long shower of flames and sparks as secondary explosions from the tank's ammunition cooked off.

Launching again that evening in support of the Brits, we were sent to attack a suspected covert meeting site that the Fedayeen forces had been using. Making our way over oil fires the Iraqis had set to blind our aircraft, we began to take heavy small arms fire. Muzzle flashes winked on the ground, and tracers zipped by us in the night sky. The volume of fire forced us to turn around and go back to the west side of the city. Knowing that we would not be able to get to the Fedayeen site, we moved to engage our second target: Ba'ath party headquarters. Finding the target on the FLIR, Kujo began to pump Hellfire missiles into the three buildings. My wingman began to shoot at the target with TOW missiles at maximum range. The missiles seemed to float toward the target, their tails aglow. At the end of that long mission in Basrah, we landed in Jalibah—our new home for the remainder of the war.

Two days later, we were back supporting the U.S. Marines as they moved up the highways between Nasiriyah and Al Kut. We launched in the early afternoon to head up north, and when we reached the front lines, we saw that the FAC we were supporting had his unit stopped along a road. On arrival, we were asked to check out a village a short distance in front of the Marines. We flew north along a highway with no apparent threat in sight. But as we moved around the western side of the towns, large black smudges started appearing around our aircraft. After a pregnant pause, loud booms shook the aircraft. Someone in the village was firing large-caliber triple-A at us. With shouts of "Break left, break left!" on the radio, our flight turned hard and raced back toward the friendlies. Kujo, ever the wizard, lased the triple-A battery and got a grid location from the computer. After we passed the coordinates to the FAC, Marine artillery took out the triple-A site.

On April 5, 2003, as Coalition forces approached Baghdad, the tension grew. Not knowing what the Iraqis had waiting for us made us fearful. During a night mission along the road that led from Al Kut to Baghdad, I ended up on the radio with Sideshow, a FAC for one of the Marine ground units and one of my closest friends. Sideshow's units were approaching Salman Pak, a large village along the Tigris River and about 15 miles from the capital. The previous night, a Marine Cobra from California had apparently hit a large set of power lines and crashed in this area. Around Baghdad, the power lines were about 350 feet high. The wires and stanchions were a tan color—difficult to see during the day and next to impossible at night.

Tasked with conducting a reconnaissance of Salman Pak to determine the enemy's disposition, I led the flight over and around the town. Wally, my wingman, reported seeing a military compound in the center of the town. Kujo used the FLIR to search for weapons, and within moments he had located an Iraqi SAM battery. After coordinating with the FAC, I maneuvered the flight to the west and rolled my aircraft in toward the target. As Kujo was lining up a missile shot, I noticed two flashes from my right side. Glancing toward them, I saw two heat-seeking missiles corkscrewing rapidly and coming right at us. Yanking the aircraft left into a violent nose-down maneuver and ejecting decoy flares, we headed for the ground to break the lock of the missiles' heat seekers. We started at 800 feet, and when we'd gotten down to around 100 feet, I pulled up. By the time we'd bottomed out of the dive, we had

descended all the way down to 50 feet and had broken lock with the missiles. When we looked up, we found ourselves in the maze of high-voltage electrical lines. It was as if someone had dumped a plate of spaghetti on our heads.

The event seemed to last for an eternity, but in reality the whole engagement was over in about four or five seconds. The missiles traveled at about Mach 2.5, so there was not a lot of time to react—and definitely not enough time to be scared. I ran into Sideshow up in Tikrit days later, and he told me the missiles had missed me by about 50 feet.

By mid-April, the end of the war nearing, I launched with two Snakes and a Huey in what we called a hunter-killer team. Our mission was to support the Marine forces that were closing in on Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. As we approached, the radio said the Marines were taking artillery fire. With plenty of gas remaining, my flight began to conduct a reconnaissance to the southeast in hopes of finding the Iraqi artillery. Flying over a grove of date trees at dusk, we found it: heavy artillery and a rocket launcher. Shortly after sunset, we were given approval to attack. After we flew multiple passes at the target, the artillery and rockets were destroyed and what was left was burning.

After refueling and re-arming, we set out to the west of Tikrit, where one of our pilots, Howdy, had begun to attack a bunker complex. The complex took up about 1,000 acres, and included large warehouses and bunkers with ammunition used by what remained of Hussein's forces. Requesting as many jets as he could get, Howdy began to direct laser-guided bombs onto the various targets. Keeping clear of the area, I positioned my flight to the north of the complex and began to hammer missiles into the bunkers. Explosions ripping out of the complex were boiling 6,000 feet into the air. The night sky was bright as day, and I could see without my NVGs. As explosions slashed from bunker to bunker, the fire grew until a mushroom cloud formed.

Howdy was approaching minimum fuel, so he handed FAC duties off to me. Using our laser to illuminate targets for laser-guided bombs and missiles, I began to direct the jets into the target area. The inferno continued to grow. Although I've seen lots of Hollywood movies where the explosions and special effects were awe-inspiring, I never thought a real fire could be this extreme.

After a quick trip to refuel and re-arm, we returned to the complex and I resumed directing the jets. As I hovered the aircraft, Kujo pumped more missiles into the remaining bunkers. In a Cobra next to me, Wally was engaging bunkers with his missiles. Friar was orbiting behind us in the Huey to provide security. After we had lased targets for approximately 25 bombs and missiles, Friar reported that we were taking fire; an Iraqi artillery unit had zeroed in on us. As we moved to escape, another Iraqi unit began to shoot missiles at us. The enlisted crew chiefs in Friar's Huey returned fire with their door guns. As we pulled out of the area, geysers of fire were still erupting from the bunkers. We turned south, toward our base. I was ready to go home.

As I reflect on the month that I spent in Iraq, I'm amazed at what we accomplished. On a personal level, I'm astonished to be alive. This was my baptism of fire, and given some of the extreme flying conditions that we had to endure, my survival made me appreciate life more. It's obvious to me now that I lived through some miracles—and that at times my fate rested in the hands of a higher power.

On a different level, I'm overwhelmed at what my squadron achieved. Although the vast majority of people in the squadron had no combat experience, the pilots and enlisted aircrew flew 2,023 combat sorties. And the maintainers kept us in the air, repairing combat damage to our aircraft that they had never seen in peacetime.

We did not lose a single Marine to an accident or to the Iraqis. I survived and my unit survived, and the individual men and women in the squadron performed heroically. I'm also astounded at the intensity with which the Marine Corps fought. Assigned to defeat experienced Republican Army and Republican Guard units, the Marines showed a tenacity that made it possible for U.S. Army units to move into Baghdad within days of the initiation of hostilities.

For almost 15 years, I had trained to perfect my trade, and this was the ultimate test.