

CHAPTER ONE

Be Not Afraid

*You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst.
You shall wander far in safety though you do not know the way.
You shall speak your words in foreign lands and all will understand.
You shall see the face of God and live.
Be not afraid. I go before you always;
Come follow me, and I will give you rest.*

FROM A PRAYER CARD I FOUND ON A BASE IN ANBAR PROVINCE, IRAQ

• Baqubah, Iraq, June 19, 2007 •

Thoughts flow on the eve of a great battle. By the time you read these words, we will be in combat. Few ears have heard even rumors of this battle, and fewer still are the eyes that will see its full scope. Even now—for the battle has already begun for some—little news of it reaches home. I have known of the plans for a month, but have remained silent.

This campaign, a series of carefully orchestrated battalion- and brigade-sized operations, is collectively the largest battle since “major hostilities” ended more than four years ago. Even the media here on the ground do not seem to have sensed its scale.

Al Qaeda and associates had little or no presence in Iraq before the current war. But we made huge mistakes early on and now we pump blood and gold into the desert to pay for those blunders. We failed to secure the streets and we sowed doubt and mistrust. We disbanded the government and the army and we created a vacuum. We tolerated corruption and ineptitude and mostly local talent filled the ranks of an insurgency. But when we flattened parts of Fallujah not once but twice in response to the

murders of four of our people, we helped create a spectacle of injustice and chaos. Al Qaeda took entrée while militias and insurgency groups began to thrive. The magnitude of true injustices was magnified line by line, hair by hair, by a frenzied media. But it wasn't the media's fault; the media did not flatten Fallujah or rape and torture the prisoners. We did that all by ourselves.

We walked into a dry, cracked land, along the two arteries of Mesopotamia that have long pulsed water and blood into the sea. In a place where everything that is not desert is tinder; sparks make fire.

When we devastated Fallujah, al Qaeda grew like a tumor. Before al Qaeda we faced a bewildering complex of insurgent groups with conflicting ideologies and goals, along with opportunistic thugs. The amalgam of men (and women) with guns was so diverse and the affiliations so dynamic that it was hard to track who was responsible for what atrocity. Each attack spawned reprisals that demanded yet another round of revenge. Al Qaeda had been trying to ignite a civil war here for several years; chaos and brutality would become its fuel.

Today al Qaeda is strong, but their welcome grows cold. The Coalition was not alone in failing to keep its promises. Iraqis love to say "America put a man on the moon but cannot turn on our lights," and the implication was we really didn't care. In so many ways we lost the moral high ground.

But then al Qaeda raped too many women and boys, cut off too many heads, and brought drugs into too many neighborhoods. And they haven't even *tried* to get the power going, or keep the markets open, or build schools, or playgrounds, or clinics for the children. Instead, as we ineptly tried to rebuild, they destroyed. They destroyed and murdered Iraqis who dared to work in such places or patronize them. And not only schools and clinics: they brought murder to mosques and churches too.

Finally, those few who were paying very close attention could feel it. It was there. A barely perceptible change in the atmosphere that signals big change could come. But to make the change we had to change. Remarkably we did. But that story is for later.

Just as this sentence was written, we began dropping bombs south of Baghdad and our troops are in contact.

In the context of this great campaign, the Battle of Baqubah, northeast of Baghdad, will be but one small part. But for those involved it will not seem small. Innocent civilians are being asked to leave. More than one thousand al Qaeda fighters are said to be in Baqubah, with perhaps another thousand adjuncts. Baqubah alone might be as intense as Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah in late 2004.

They are ready for us. Giant bombs are buried in the roads. Snipers have chiseled holes in walls so that they can shoot not from roofs or windows, but from deep inside buildings, where we cannot see the flash or hear the shots. They will shoot for our faces and necks. Car bombs are already assembled. Suicide vests are prepared.

The enemy will try to herd us into their traps, and likely many of us will be killed before it ends. Already they have been blowing up bridges to restrict our movements. Entire buildings are rigged with explosives. They have rockets, mortars, and bombs hidden in places they know we are likely to cross, or to seek cover. They will use human shields and force people to drive bombs at us.

They will use their favorite of all weapons, the camera, and make it look like we are ravaging the city and that they are defeating us. For they have understood from the beginning what we learned almost too late: this is political war and political war is media war.

By the time this dispatch is published, we will be inside Baqubah, and we will be killing them.

MOMENT OF TRUTH IN IRAQ

Our jets will drop bombs. Helicopters will cover us and medevac our wounded and killed. Artillery will be firing, and our tanks moving in. And Humvees. And Strykers. Our people will capture commanding positions and cut off escape routes. The idea this time is not to chase al Qaeda out, but to trap and kill them head-on, or in ambushes, or while they sleep. This time, when they are wounded, they will be unable to go to hospitals without being captured, and so their wounds will fester and some will die painfully. It will be horrible for al Qaeda. Horror they sowed and tonight horror they will reap.

They will get no rest. No one is asking for surrender, but because we are who we are, if they surrender, they will be taken.

Our soldiers will go in on foot and fight from house to house. They will shoot rockets into enemy hiding spaces. Our snipers will shoot them in their heads and chests. All the talk of what should or could be done will smash head-on against the searing reality of combat.

Nothing is certain. I am here and have been all year. We are in trouble, but we have a great general. The only one, I have long believed, who can lead the way out of this morass. Iraq is not hopeless. Iraq can stand again, but first it must cast off these demons. Or kill them.

And while the battle rages, the prayer card will be in my pocket.

*Be not afraid. I go before you always;
Come follow me, and I will give you rest.*

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