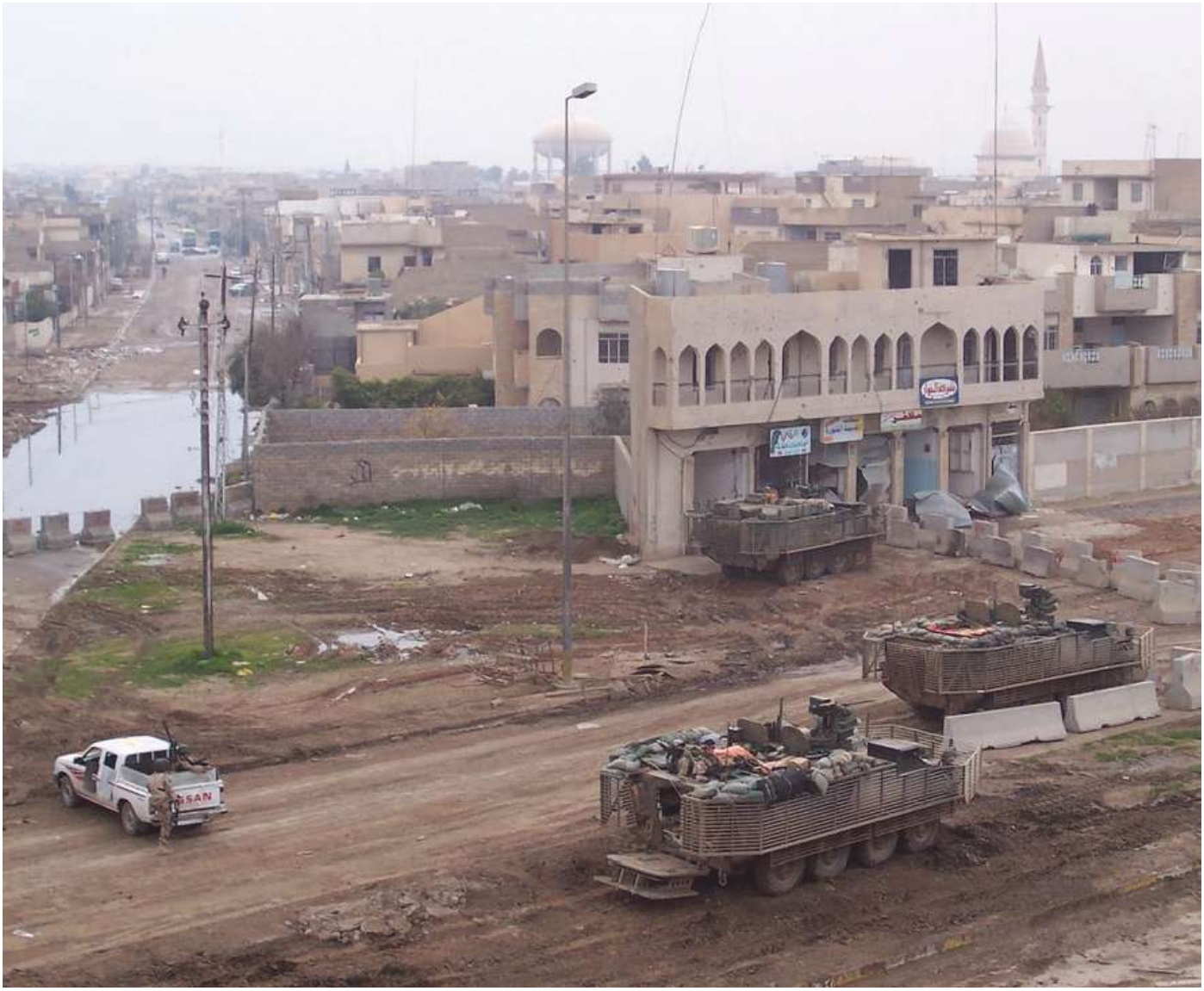


**In 2005, a newly formed Iraqi Intervention Force led by U.S. advisors was sent to take Mosul, Iraq, back from the hands of insurgents.**

# When the Tempest Gathers

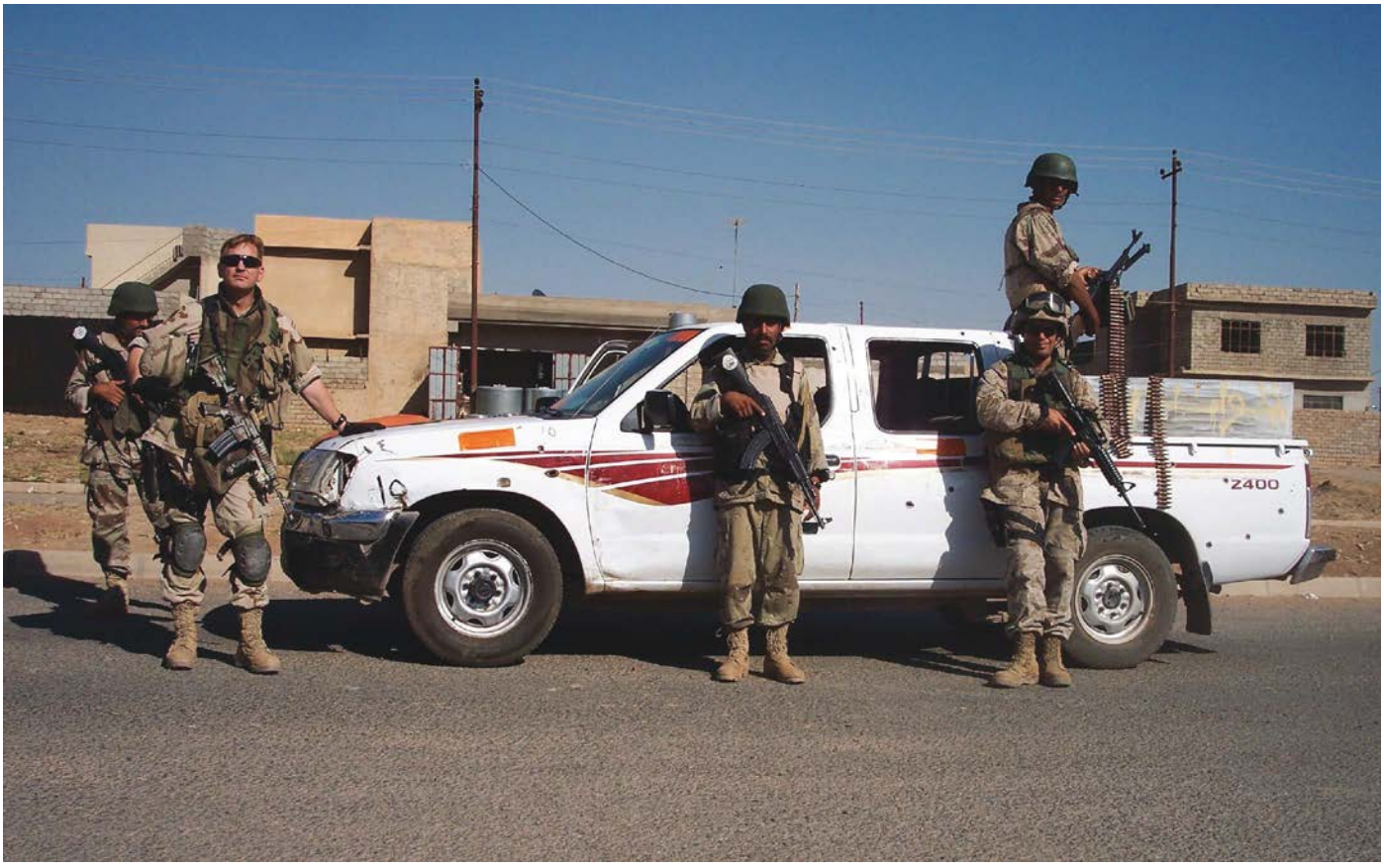
## From Mogadishu to the Fight Against ISIS, A Marine Special Operations Commander at War

By Andrew Milburn

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from "When the Tempest Gathers: From Mogadishu to the Fight Against ISIS, a Marine Special Operations Commander at War" by Andrew Milburn, retired Marine colonel and infantry and special operations officer. Col Milburn's memoir recounts his career leading Marines in combat in Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and signed copies are available for purchase from The Marine Shop. All photos are courtesy of the author.*

**Prelude**

After the battle of Fallujah in November 2004, many of the insurgents who fled the city headed north to Mosul, where they ousted the local police and took control of the city. In early 2005, the newly formed Iraqi Intervention Force (IIF) led by a contingent of U.S. advisors was sent to take Mosul back from the hands of the insurgents. Roughly two-thirds of the U.S. advisor contingent to the IIF were Marines, with the remaining third composed of soldiers from an Army reserve unit, including many who felt ill-prepared for this mission. The excerpt begins as Major Andrew Milburn takes over an advisor team with the IFF's 3rd Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Falah, assigned to the most violent area of Mosul.




**MNSTC-I directed that all U.S. personnel ride in armored humvees, but there was only one in the IIF's 3rd Bn. The Nissan pickup truck was most definitely not bulletproof.**

The next morning, I addressed the team in the courtyard, the only place where we could find separation from the company of soldiers milling around the building. Eleven advisors, seven soldiers, three Marines and a Navy corpsman, stood in loose formation, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold, eyeing me with studied nonchalance. I cast aside any thought of trying to inspire them with a blast of once-more-into-the-breach-dear-friends. They didn't look like "greyhounds standing in the slips" and after a sleepless night, I wasn't feeling like King Henry on the eve of Agincourt. Nor, I sensed, was this an audience that would respond to an approach from the other end of the cultural spectrum: Gunny Hartman's "because-I-am-hard-you-will-not-like-me" speech from "Full Metal Jacket." Hard or not, I guessed that most of them already didn't like me.

So I played it without fanfare, in a level, conversational tone: who I was and why I was there. I talked about the mission: to put the Muj on their back foot, securing the area and enabling the population to go about their business without fear of attack. I talked about the importance of the upcoming elections. I looked from face to face as I spoke. A couple were nodding, but most just stared back without expression.

"The first thing that we're going to do is get the Iraqis out on the streets. Each one of you is going to play a role in that because every patrol will have an advisor. I'm going to need your full support to do all the things we need to do," I concluded. "Are there any questions?"

Someone raised a hand. It was a Marine—a large, thickly muscled gunnery sergeant.

"Gunny Cook, Sir. How are we going to do that?" he asked. "By regs we can't leave the [combat outpost] COP without another American and an armored vehicle. We don't have enough people or vehicles to do that, to man the ops room and have a decent rotation that allows rest."

"Well, we may only be able to sustain a handful of patrols a day, but it's better than what we are doing now." There were some nods, but most just continued to stare at me impassively. I tried another tack. "And it may be that the Iraqis will begin to take some patrols by themselves."

"They can't do that," an Army sergeant spoke up. "We need to be with them all the time to avoid green on blue like what happened with 1st Company."

"Exactly right, which is why I need your help," I thought, but shrugged. "I don't think for a moment that this is going to be easy—but we're going to get them out there."

Later that morning, I met the battalion's operations and intelligence officers in an office that had been converted into an operations center by the addition of a few radios and a map of the city on the wall.

Major Mohammed, the operations

**"The first thing that we're going to do is get the Iraqis out on the streets. Each one of you is going to play a role in that because every patrol will have an advisor. I'm going to need your full support to do all the things we need to do."**

**From the left: Capt Zuher, Maj Mohammed, Maj Milburn and the battalion operations officer, Maj Mohammed, at Combat Outpost Tampa, Mosul, Feb. 1, 2005.**

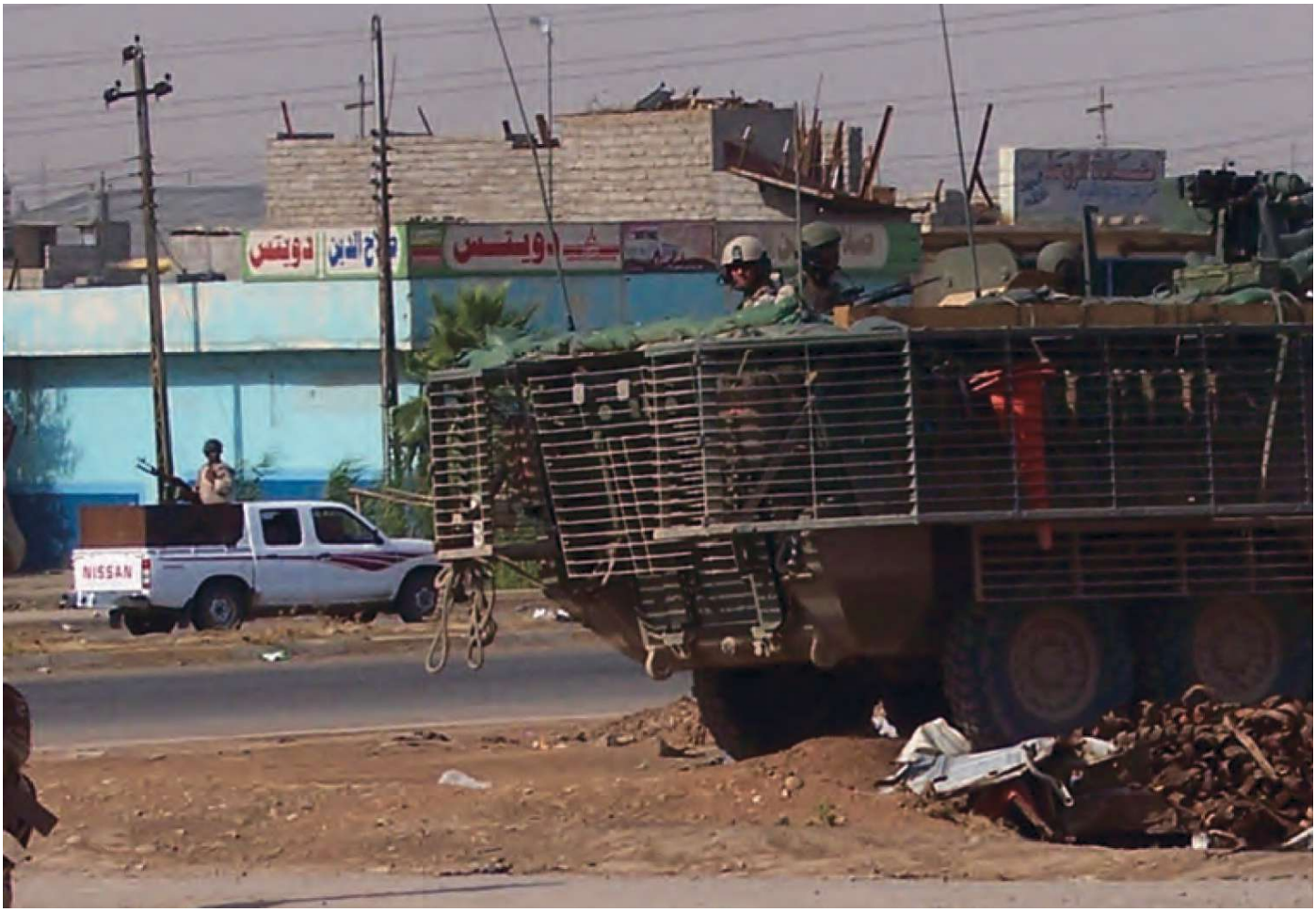
officer, was tall and thin with a long mournful face and an air of quiet intensity. He gripped my hand firmly, but his tight smile never quite made it to his eyes, which were watery and sad, like those of a bloodhound.

By contrast, the intelligence officer, Captain Zuher, was short and pudgy with the face of a mischievous cherub. He had a broad grin and eyes that glittered with amusement under gull-wing brows. Like Mohammed, he spoke English, but whereas Mohammed always appeared to be choosing his words, Zuher prattled away with abandon in a style that was unusual for a captain in the Iraqi Army. He had, I was to learn, a dry sense of humor that also broke cultural norms. Sometime during those first few days, he asked me why I spoke with an English accent. When I explained that I had grown up in England, but that my mother had been American, he looked perplexed. I thought that he might have misunderstood, so I repeated my answer. He nodded, saying, "Sadi—I understand. I'm just wondering how to explain to the others that you have a mother, I don't think that they will believe me."

Over the course of time, I came to recognize Zuher's irreverent sense of humor as a shield against the horrors that life had thrown his way. Like many of his peers, he'd had some tough experiences during the U.S. invasion. His company was ordered to defend Baghdad airport, and it was only after he had seen half his soldiers crushed or blown to smithereens by U.S. tanks that his company commander passed the word that it was every man for himself. And now, like his comrades, he worried about his family in Baghdad, aware that his profession made them a target. Zuher's sense of humor could be annoying, but it was his inner carapace, and I couldn't begrudge him that.

Zuher walked to the map and gave us an intelligence update, jabbing with his finger at various locations around our position. I was surprised how much he appeared to know about the insurgent groups arrayed against us, their background and areas of operation within the city, even their leadership. He explained that we were facing an alliance between former Ba'athists and a group known as Ansar Al Islam, an offshoot from al-qaida, led at one time by Zarqawi himself. I asked him where he was getting this intelligence, and he paused, glancing at Mohammed before replying.

"Because some of them were our friends. Not the Wahabis," Zuher used the jundi term for Islamic extremists, "but the guys who served in the old army. We talk on the phone. They warn us to stay away from certain areas. Sometimes they give us tips." He shrugged and looked at me with a half-smile. "I think that perhaps you don't believe me."




**A combined operation with 3rd Bn and the U.S. Army's 1/5 infantry in Mosul. Note the stark contrast between the Nissan pickup truck and the Stryker infantry fighting vehicle.**

As Americans, we wanted things to be black and white; we weren't comfortable with nuance. But for the Iraqis, success was survival, and pragmatism trumped allegiance. We would only see glimpses of the relationship that the battalion's officers had with their former comrades, not because they wanted to hide these things from us, but because they knew that we wouldn't understand.

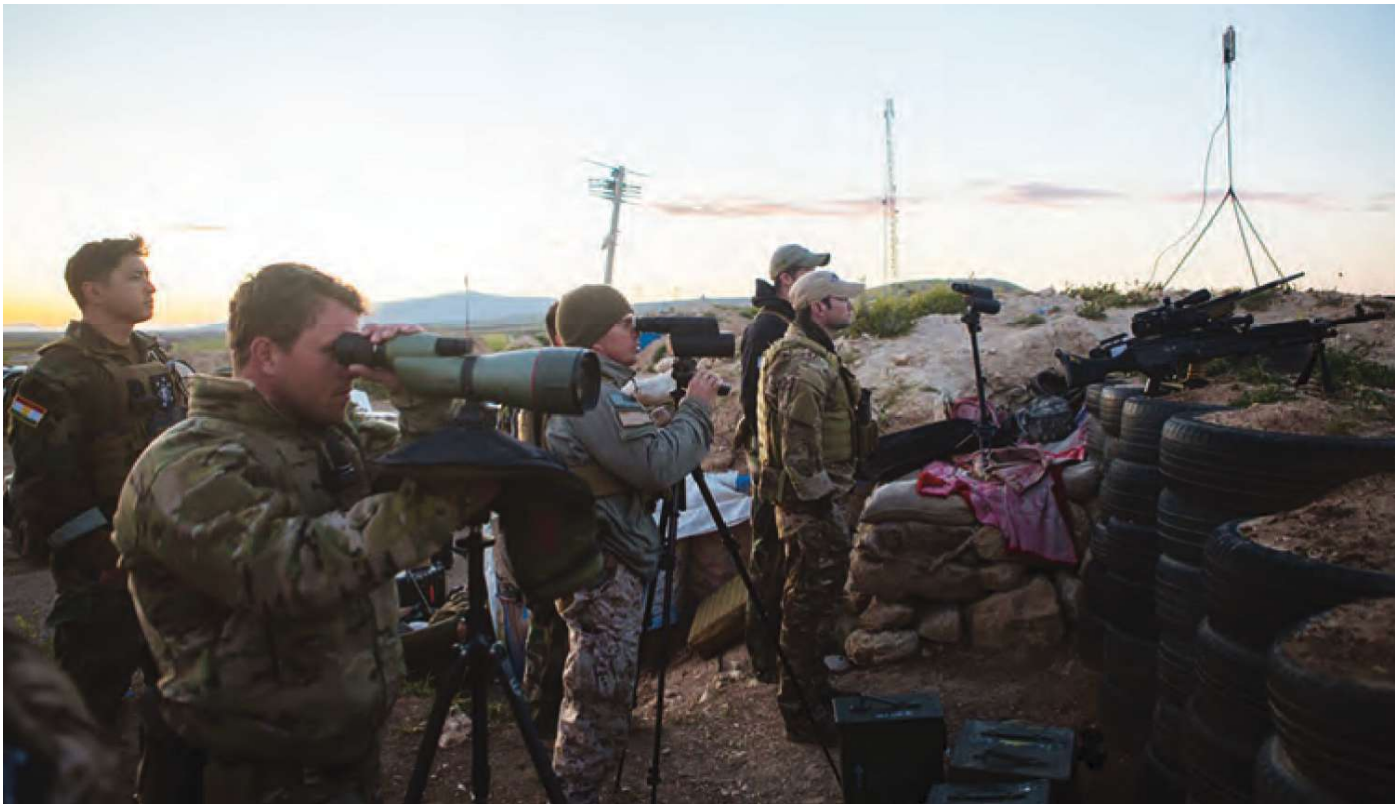
Falah agreed to start pushing patrols out beginning the next day. I figured that we could support up to 16 patrols a day, at least through the elections. We would push the patrols out in a cloverleaf pattern around the police station, each patrol overlapping others by time and route to reduce the threat of ambush. Satellite patrolling, it was called, a technique that I had learned from the British observers in Victorville.

I thought that it was a pretty good plan; it made tactical sense, and we could probably just manage it with two advisors per patrol. But it was my plan; I hadn't consulted Falah, who owned the soldiers who would make it happen. He agreed to four patrols a day, at least for the first few days, until we had a sense of how things were. He explained this with a smile in the manner that Iraqis do when they don't agree with you, but don't want to offend you. I wanted to point out that four patrols were a measly amount for 250 soldiers. We had to impose a security bubble around our positions while establishing our presence in the Sunni neighborhoods that surrounded us, but I knew better than to argue. Falah had made a decision in front of subordinates, and to push him would only entrench his position. In any case, I didn't know yet how many Americans I could count on to accompany the patrols, so I conceded with good grace.

**I thought that it was a pretty good plan; it made tactical sense, and we could probably just manage it with two advisors per patrol. But it was my plan; I hadn't consulted Falah, who owned the soldiers who would make it happen.**

"You've got five of us, sir." Staff Sergeant Reyes was the senior Army NCO, a boyish-looking Chicagoan who appeared delighted to find himself in the middle of a war. I was secretly pleased that all but two of our Army contingent had elected to participate in the patrol schedule. The remaining two were hopelessly unsuited to be walking the streets, and though it grated on my Marine psyche to give them a choice, I let them be. With five soldiers, four Marines (counting me) and a Navy corpsman, we weren't in bad shape.

The corpsman, whose name was also Reyes—though we called him "Doc" to avoid confusion—was a bulky youngster with an eager-to-please disposition. The ability to provide on-the-spot care for the traumatically wounded depends on qualities beyond skill. Even the well-trained can freeze with shock at the crucial moment. Doc Reyes, however, would prove to have that intangible gene that drove him to succor the wounded—American or Iraqi—regardless of risk to sensibility or self. At the time, I was simply impressed by his eagerness to go out on patrol.



**Observing Islamic State positions, Bashiqa Ridge, Iraq.**

The first patrol was going to be a leaders' reconnaissance, with Falah, Mohammed, Zuher and me visiting each of the two company outposts, beginning with 3rd Company, who were billeted in a train station about a mile away from the IPA. That night I outlined the plan to Russ Jamison by radio, requesting a back-up QRF from his position at brigade should we need it. Russ agreed—and then added that he wanted to bring the Iraqi Brigade commander, General Shocker, along on the patrol.

"We've got to get them over this here-be-giants mentality. Having Shocker get out to see for himself, setting the example, is going to give them a boost," he said. "Shocker's been up here before, he knows the area—actually, I think this is where he lost his eye." The brigadier had a glass eye, which he had the alarming habit of removing during meetings—setting it on the table as though to better observe his staff.

The day began well enough with Brigadier Shocker and a small coterie from his headquarters linking up with us at the IPA, amidst the usual flurry of cheek-kissing and elaborate greetings. Falah showed the brigadier around the operations room, and they chatted excitedly in front of the map, which now depicted a network of planned patrol routes drawn up by Mohammed and Jay the night before. The brigadier seemed delighted by this, congratulating a beaming Falah on his aggressiveness and clapping him on the shoulder.

A little later, we set off, a string of white Toyota pick-up trucks packed with jundi. We made our way through the barricades outside the police station and onto the main street that we called Route Nissan, a name that had become synonymous with reports of attacks on the U.S. Brigade's tactical net. The 101st Airborne Division had named the city's major thoroughfares after cars, and their combat outposts after U.S. cities. It made good sense from a military standpoint—it was much easier to track the progress of a convoy from Nissan to Porsche to Ford than it was to try to decipher Arabic names. I wondered, too, if it was also our way of trying to impose order on chaos, as though giving prosaic names to sinister places helped reduce their menace.

**I jogged up the steps to the station, reaching the top as the next shots rang out. I turned to see a soldier spill down the steps, rifle clattering ahead of him, helmet rolling into the gutter.**

We entered the flow of traffic with much yelling and gesturing from the jundi in the back of each truck. The cars behind us ground to a halt to let us in, before following the last truck at a wary distance. By this stage of the war, Iraqi drivers were conditioned to stay away from military convoys by the proclivity for soldiers to ram and shoot anything that looked as though it might be a threat. In Mosul, the threat was often real. On our first day in the city, I was on a patrol when a red Opel pulled up beside the lead vehicle and exploded. Opels were then ubiquitous on the streets of Mosul and were used so frequently for attacks that they became the subject of a running joke among the advisors. Fortunately, the charge had not been wired correctly, and only one of three artillery rounds detonated. The other two were hurled across the road intact along with pieces of the car and driver, splattering against the side of the humvee but leaving its occupants unharmed.

Now each advisor rode in a separate pick-up truck—there was no sense risking more than one of us in the same vehicle. MNSTC-I directed that all U.S. personnel were to ride in armored humvees, but we only had one for the entire battalion. In any case, most of us had a problem with sheltering behind armor, while our Iraqi counterparts had only a pathetically thin strip of sheet metal to protect them from the savage blast of an IED.

**A Marine Raider prepares to provide covering fire for the Peshmerga attack on Basheer.**

Gunny Cook ran down the steps of the train station as we screeched to a halt out front.

"You need to run, gents, we've been taking accurate small arms fire."

On cue, there was a burst of gunfire and the jundi poured out of the trucks, scampering for cover. I jogged up the steps to the station, reaching the top as the next shots rang out. I turned to see a soldier spill down the steps, rifle clattering ahead of him, helmet rolling into the gutter. Almost instantly, two other soldiers grabbed him—one by the legs, the other under his arms—and hauled him back up the steps into the building with a speed fueled by adrenalin. Every jundi within sight started blazing away with a deafening racket.

Doc Reyes and an Iraqi medic were working on the casualty as Russ and I ran over.

"We need to get him to Maurez, sir. Gunshot wound, lower abdomen." The jundi was unconscious. His head lolled to one side in a comrade's cupped hands, and his eyes were half-open, showing only the whites. The brigadier was in a heated debate with Falah, Kajs was on the radio with brigade, and the jundi outside continued to fire away with reckless abandon.

Russ explained to the brigadier that we had to get the soldier to medical care right away, while I pulled Mohammed aside and told him to put a stop to the shooting. Mohammed gave me a quick nod and ran down the steps, yelling for the NCOs. To my surprise, order was quickly restored, and by the time that we had loaded the casualty onto a truck with Doc in attendance, the jundi were mounted up ready to go. I shook my head. Sometimes it took forever to get the Iraqis to do the simplest things, while other times, they made things happen faster than we would expect U.S. troops to respond.

There was another burst of incoming

fire as we pulled away from the train station. This time, it was a concentrated barrage, and I could hear the clunk of rounds hitting metal around us. I held on to the door handle as we gathered speed, careening around a traffic circle, the driver hammering the horn with the heel of his hand. The convoy split into two coming out of the roundabout—the brigade vehicles took the first exit bound for Maurez, while we took the second, shooting out of the circle like a rock from a slingshot. Zuher, sitting behind me, yelled in my ear.

"The gunner's hit." I swiveled around and caught a glimpse of boots, toes pointing skywards.

"I saw it—he was shot in the head." Zuher gabbled. "S---," I thought. Can this be any more of a disaster?"

Back at the IPA, Zuher and I clambered out of the truck before it had stopped moving and raced around to the tailgate. To our surprise, the soldiers were still sitting in the back, laughing uproariously. In their midst sat the gunner holding his helmet in front of him. The bullet had torn a deep furrow along its side, shredding the Kevlar like cardboard, but leaving him unharmed. I grinned at the fortunate jundi, slapping his shoulder. "Mubarek!" Congratulations. In seconds, he was mobbed by a crowd of soldiers, who lifted him from the truck and danced around him. Their hands were raised above their heads, and each grinned from ear to ear. A procession of the battalion's officers made their way through the throng to hug and kiss the bulletproof soldier who was now standing by the tailgate, still holding his helmet in front of him like a birthday cake.

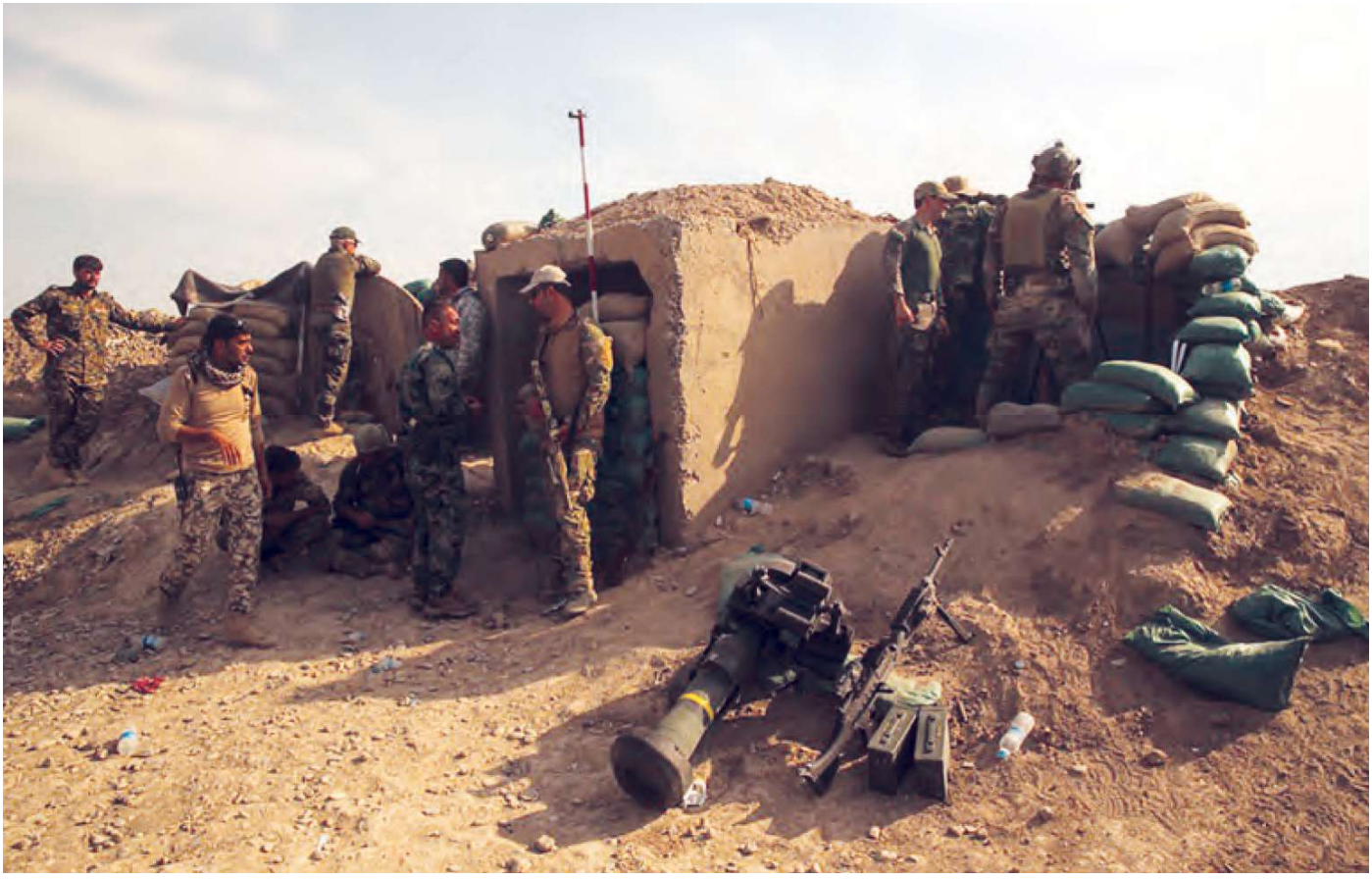
**The bullet had torn a deep furrow along its side, shredding the Kevlar like cardboard, but leaving him unharmed. I grinned at the fortunate jundi, slapping his shoulder. "Mubarek!"**

Thank God for small mercies. But the mission itself had been a complete bust—one wounded jundi, and we had turned tail. It only reaffirmed the Iraqi's perception that the Muj owned the streets—or so I thought.

Falah called Kajs over to take a photo of the battalion's officers clustered around the charmed jundi. Zuher caught my eye and yelled above the din: "Alhamdulillah," meaning thanks be to God. "This is very good."

Once again, I had failed to divine correctly the mood of my Iraqi partners. To me, the jundi's escape was an isolated incident of good luck in an otherwise luckless day, but to them, it was a symbol of new-found fortune and a portent of better things to come. The deflective properties of Kevlar had accomplished more than any appeal to duty. I led Mohammed by the arm to the operations room to plan the following day's mission. Sometimes, as the saying goes, it's better to be lucky than good.

*Author's bio: Andrew Milburn was born in Hong Kong and raised in the United Kingdom where he attended St. Paul's School and University College London before he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps as a 24-year-old British law school graduate. During his 31-year career, he commanded Marine and Special Operations forces in combat at every rank. He retired in March 2019 as the Chief of Staff at Special Operations Command Central.*



**Marine Raiders and Peshmerga on the front line outside Mosul.**