Fried With Fear

FOR all its filth and stench and danger, and for all that I wanted to go home, Baghdad could be a beautiful place.

Every day, around dawn, I would wake in my room at the Palestine, go out onto our precarious balcony, light up the little cooker and watch the city wake up.

Palls of black smoke would break the pink-blue sky-line, US helicopters already screaming overhead every five minutes, and that smell of burning rubbish would be rising to meet me on the cool, humid, morning air. But the lilting, melodic calling to prayer, echoing from the loudspeakers of the mosques nearby through the movie-set streets of decaying Arab and French colonial buildings, and the mist rising from the lazy Tigris just a hundred yards away from where I stood, had an exotic and unearthly appeal. Soon, the log-jammed traffic down below would be beeping away and the street vendors' barbecues would be lit for the morning's trade; then the sweet, smoky scent of cooking lamb and chicken would waft up, masking the other less pleasant aromas.

On this particular May morning, though, the streets were very quiet, with very few cars and no food sellers to be seen.

Nibras always arrived first, always pleased with himself for having beaten Adil, who had to cadge a lift to the hotel. [Publisher's note: Nibras was Hughes' Iraqi driver, Adil his translator.] Today, he arrived even earlier than usual and, as he walked into the room, he looked worried. In his broken English, he explained. 'Road not busy in this morning,' he said. 'No car - something very bad.'

Julian came in and they said their *Salaam Aleikums* before I pushed Nibras to elaborate. But he couldn't explain anything, other than that he felt uneasy.

Adil arrived shortly afterwards, swaggering into the room with a nod and a sheepish grin as he pointed towards a shiny new pair of black shoes he must have bought on the way home the night before. I winced: the previous day, I had made some ludicrous, and light-

hearted, crack about the fact that he always wore sandals, and always had dirty feet. I'd meant absolutely nothing by it - I was hardly spotless myself - but the poor guy had taken it to heart, thinking it was a criticism.

'Mate, I wasn't being serious,' I said. 'You didn't need to buy those. So, anyway… are they looted or non-looted?'

I hoped the obvious joke would show I was sorry to have embarrassed him.

It worked. He raised his eyes to the heavens, grinned and swore at me in Iraqi, before wandering out onto the balcony to make some tea. He was limping slightly from the rub of the new shoes on his heels, and I caught him looking back to see if we had noticed. I laughed at him and he laughed back, the minor cultural misunderstanding forgotten.

Over breakfast of coffee, Nibras's warm flat breads and strawberry jam, we asked Adil if had knew why the streets were so quiet.

'Lots of rumours,' he said, chewing his bread and sipping his sweet tea. 'There was a story that Saddam is back in power. I don't think it, but many people do. Also, there were lot of kidnappings in last few days. About 10 people murdered I think. The insurgents… ' He pulled a face to show his distaste. 'Is not very safe right now.'

Nibras nodded in agreement. 'Not safe,' he said.

Adil looked at me and Julian, suddenly very serious. 'I heard that the gangs are really trying hard to find western journalists,' he said. 'They want to kill someone to make a big news.' He pulled his finger across his throat, in the time-honoured, international gesture. 'We must be very, very careful where we go now.'

It wasn't a pleasant thought. It was more than a year since Islamic extremists had beheaded the American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan and, now I came to think of it, it seemed at least reasonable to assume that others of their ilk might try the same thing in Iraq. We'd travelled around the country, unarmed and relatively unconcerned, for weeks now and, although we'd had the odd close shave, we'd been fine. But what if we'd just been lucky? And what if our luck ran out? The trickle of foreign TV companies pulling out of Baghdad was turning into a flood, and more and more print journalists would only leave the safety of their hotels to go out on

breaking news stories. Although we hadn't yet reached that stage, I didn't blame them in the slightest. The days of bumbling round, trawling, hoping to come across something newsworthy, were disappearing fast. Adil certainly seemed to be saying that the rules had changed.

'You're right,' I said.' There's no point in taking any risks any more. It's just not worth it.'

Julian nodded. I'd never really seen him show any fear; at Karbala, for instance, he'd refused to remove his earring, despite Adil telling him that some worshippers would find it odd that a man would wear an earring, and that some might actually take offence to it. 'I'm sorry Adil but no, bollocks to that,' he'd said, succinctly. 'No-one tells me to take my earrings out. I wouldn't do it for The Queen, I'm sorry, I'm not taking it out here.' He also regularly wore military clothing - multi-pocketed US combat trousers, ideal for stashing bits and pieces of his kit - despite the fact that it increased the likelihood of someone taking a pot shot and hitting him (or me, come to think of it - they weren't exactly good shots).

But even he was getting more careful. 'I agree,' he said. 'Let's wise up a bit in future.'

Everyone nodded, digesting this thought. Then we put it to one side.

We had been asked by our desks to visit the site of the old British Embassy in the capital. It had been occupied a few days previously by a small unit of 50 soldiers from the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (1 Para). They had been the first Brits to use the building since it had been abandoned in 1991, just before the first Gulf War. The detachment was commanded by a Captain Tom McDade, an Irishman so legendarily tough that even the ex-SAS guys floating around the hotel spoke of him in hushed tones.

The TV security guy B (I'm withholding his name at his request) - who had served in the Hereford regiment - had worked with McDade in Northern Ireland. He'd warned me the previous day, 'He's a great bloke Tom, but one hard bastard so don't piss him off under any circumstances. Do that, and you'll have us all after you. A lot of the lads are very loyal to him.'

Armed with that warning, we knew we had to follow through with a promise we had made to McDade the day before. We had

visited the embassy and asked for permission to have a look around inside and interview some of his troops.

'I probably shouldn't let you do that, boys' he'd said. 'But if you promise not to take pictures unless I say you can, and you don't tell any of the locals what kind of tools we've got lying around, I guess you can have peep.'

'Great,' I said. 'Tell you what, we'll bring you all some ice cold beers.'

'Oooh,' he winced. 'Shouldn't really - this place is meant to be dry. But, well… ' He grinned, and winked.

So we sent Nibras to get the ale and a couple of large bags of ice from somewhere. Before long he'd succeeded, like the scrounger in The Great Escape, and was back with the booze and ice. Quickly, before it all melted in the boot of his car, we sped round to the embassy, just a few miles along the river from where we were. It was a splendid 19th century colonial building which had once been the home of General Stanley Maude, a legend amongst British soldiers in Iraq. He had captured Baghdad in 1917 and had then made a conciliatory speech to the locals which resonates even today.

'Your palaces have fallen into ruins,' he had told the Iraqis. *'Your sons have been carried off to wars not of your own seeking, your wealth has been stripped from you by unjust men and squandered in distant places. I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your own civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so you may be united with your kinsmen in the north, east, south and west, in realising the aspirations of your race.'*

A fine speech, and one that had applied just as well during Saddam's reign.

We stopped outside the building and staggered up to the front gate, lager in our arms, to be met by the Iraqi caretaker, Mahdi Alwan. His was another amazing story; unpaid, Mr Alwan and his son had tended the building and its grounds since the day our ambassador had left. He'd kept everything spotless and had even protected the royal crest which had hung above the main entrance. He'd recently been given back pay and a bonus, so was a pretty happy chap, and he greeted us with a wide grin. 'Welcome Misters,' he said. 'Welcome.'

We kicked at the main door, struggling under the weight of the dripping ice and 50 cans of lager, one can for each soldier inside.

A Geordie voice called from within: 'Who is it?'

'It's the *Daily Mirror*,' I replied.

There was a shooting of bolts and a rattling of the handle and the door swung open to reveal three sweating Paras. They eyed our beers like… well, like thirsty squaddies *would* eye a load of ice-cold beers in 100°F heat in May in Baghdad, and beckoned us inside. Leaving Adil and Nibras outside - no locals would be allowed in until the place was properly fortified - we stepped over the threshold and handed the amber nectar over. Cradling the boxes like babies, the three Paras carefully and conspiratorially carried them off to a darkened corner inside a mounted gun position nearby.

McDade came over with a big grin, shaking our hands vigorously and thanking us for the lager. I don't think he had believed for one minute that we'd be able to come up with the goods, but we had so he felt duty bound to show us around the place. We walked into a wood-panelled bar which was called The Oasis Club, where once embassy staff and diplomats had shed the heat of the day and lost themselves in a dry Martini or a gin and tonic. On one of the walls was the Winter 1990-91 fixture list for the Baghdad Darts League, which had been wrapped up rather suddenly because of the war a few hundred miles to the south. I wondered what had become of the players of the two teams - the Bent Arrows and the Double Bulls - which had been due to meet on February 23, 1991. Two glasses stood on the bar, with dusty mould growing inside them - the remnants of a couple of hastily-abandoned cocktails. McDade had touched nothing, wanting to keep it exactly as it was before the arrival of the acting ambassador, Christopher Segar, who had arrived earlier that day.

Outside, the embassy's small cricket field - I loved that, a cricket field… how ridiculously British - was filling up with temporary buildings. A wooden veranda overlooked The Tigris, which was heaving with river traffic.

The whole scene was very colonial; I could imagine the likes of TE Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, almost a century before, whiling their time away in the cooling shade, sipping long drinks and

chatting about the issues of the day. I could have sat there for hours. But McDade reluctantly ushered us inside.

'It's a bit dangerous out here,' he said. 'They will insist on having a pop at us from the other side of the river. They're very poor shots, but every dog has his day.'

'Have you had any near misses?' I asked.

'Not really,' he said. 'A couple of AK rounds hit the wall next to me the other evening when I was having a cup of tea, but it was nothing serious. The lads had the fellow who was shooting at us in their sights, but I stopped them from slotting him. It causes too much trouble with the locals. I think the bloke was just letting us know he was there.'

I imagined how 'slotted' the Iraqi would have been had he been seen firing at an American embassy; he'd have been slotted into about a thousand pieces. It was so good to meet calm, unexcitable and unimpressed-by-their-surroundings British troops after so many weeks of watching the Yanks in action.

We wandered back into the building and I grabbed a stack of Baghdad British Embassy letterheads, by way of a souvenir. McDade frowned, and I went to put them back. But then he shrugged. 'Not much use for them now, I suppose,' he said.

Then he smiled. 'Hey, you've got to see this.' He walked back out and towards a garage and flung the doors open with a flourish. 'Pretty amazing, eh?'

Sitting in the garage, beneath an inch of grey dust, were two cars, a Dodge and a Volvo. Their tyres had flattened over the years, but they were otherwise untouched. Saddam's lunatic son Uday was notoriously obsessed with cars. Imagine the fun the psychotic Freddie Mercury look-alike could have had playing stock cars with the British Ambassador's Volvo? Yet he hadn't even thought to have a look to see if they'd been left behind. That's just being a lazy despot, in my book.

We had a good couple of hours there, chatting to the Paras and reading old letters from the John Major days pinned to various notice boards. But then it was time to go. It had been an interesting, unusual visit but I knew we'd struggle to get anything into the paper. I love tabloid journalism for its hard-nosed simplicity but, just occasionally, I wished I had the opportunity to write about things that were slightly tangential to the obvious angles.

The feeling of homesickness had grown, badly. Maybe it was mixing with a load of (non-journalist) Brits, maybe it was the tense discussions of that morning. I just I felt different about being there. I don't know whether Julian felt the same way. I do know that thinking about home made me take my eye off the ball.

On the way back to the hotel, Nibras raised the idea of visiting some caves about 60 miles east of Baghdad on the main highway heading for the Iranian border. He had been banging on for weeks about the place, probably with a little Brucie bonus in mind. He was convinced it was the kind of place that Comical Ali might have gone to hide out. It sounded just about plausible, and it was only lunchtime, so we decided to give it a whirl.

We arrived back at The Palestine, quickly filed some words and pictures from the embassy back to London - it made about two paragraphs the next day, by the way, stuck at the back of the paper, between the cartoon strips and the astrology - had our lunch and met the two Iraqis outside the hotel. Our ex-SAS pal Bob was standing there talking to B and another of their colleagues, the man who'd been shot in the arm protecting his TV crew. As we gathered around our car, the three of them walked over.

'Aye, aye, boys,' said Bob, all smiles and bonhomie. 'What's the plan for today, then?'

'We're thinking of heading out east, towards the Iranian border. There's some caves there and… '

'Hang on, hang on,' said Bob, raising his palm, his face suddenly serious. 'You're going *where*?'

'Towards the Iranian border,' I repeated. 'There's these caves… '

'I've been wondering about you lot for a while, now,' said B. 'No back-up, no guns. You can't stay lucky for ever, you know.'

I half thought about mentioning Nibras's pistol, but I wasn't sure if it actually worked and, if it did, I thought there was a fair chance he'd do more damage to us with it than anyone else.

'Ah, we'll be alright,' I said. 'It's only a little trip out. We'll be back before dark.'

'Yeah,' said Julian, with a grin. 'Don't worry. We'll be careful.'

Bob and B weren't happy, but there was little they could do to stop us.

B looked at Nibras's BMW and pulled out a notebook. He wrote down the make, colour and number plate. 'Right,' he said, staring very hard at our driver. 'I want to know the exact route you're taking, where you're going and when you'll be back. Show me. Now! On the map!'

Shaken by his aggression, Nibras pulled out a map and B made more notes.

'If you're not back within two hours, we're coming out looking for you,' he said. And, stony-faced, he turned on his heel and stalked away.

A minute or two later, sitting in the back of the car, Julian and I discussed the incident briefly.

'What the hell was all that about?' I said.

'Dunno,' he said. 'They weren't happy though, mate. Never seen them so protective of us.'

'Sorry they were rude to you guys,' I called to the two Iraqis. 'Totally unnecessary.'

'It is not a problem,' came the answer from Adil.

We drove through the streets of Baghdad. They were still unusually empty, and even the Americans seemed to be staying at home. There were no troops walking the streets, just the occasional tank or a convoy of armoured Humvees steaming by.

I did notice that their top gunners seemed unusually tense; normally they would wave you by to overtake them, but today they were holding their palms upright and ordering us to stay back with a pushing motion of the hand not holding the machine gun. We could have turned back but, for some reason, despite our breakfast-time chat about the increasing dangers, we didn't really talk about it.

Nibras negotiated his way towards the Eastern suburbs of Baghdad, a scruffy, dusty sprawl of dirty red, single-storey houses and shuttered-up shop fronts. Occasionally, we'd pass a gaggle of old men, sitting outside the odd cafe, chatting away. Soon, we reached the Eastern Road. This was busier, though by no means packed, a steady stream of pick-ups, trucks and cars bowling towards the Iranian border. This was a new route to us: a double-laned, smoothly Tarmac-d affair, with a three-foot high concrete central reservation.

We sped past occasional side streets, taking little notice of what was going on down them.

That was the second big mistake we made that day.

The first had been to leave the hotel in the first place.

The third was not checking our rear view mirror.

On the 'hostile environment' courses designed to give inexperienced journalists half a chance of staying alive in places like this, the instructors constantly impress on you the importance of knowing what is going on around you at all times. They stress, especially, the rear window and side streets. I don't *think* they mention chatting to your photographer mate about the girl you've been emailing back home, and how desperate you are…

I remember that we came to a stretch of open road, and that there was a group of men loitering on the hard shoulder, chatting and smoking and watching the cars as they drove by. I remember that they narrowed their eyes when they saw us, and I remember seeing them sort of dive into a people carrier parked there.

But then, where was I? Oh, that's it. There's this girl…

Nibras was driving along happily, eyes fixed on the road ahead, and Adil had his head down in the passenger seat, either asleep or just nodding off.

We'd driven on for another couple of miles or so when, suddenly, Nibras shouted something in Arabic that made us all sit up. It sounded like something was happening up ahead so Julian and I leaned into the middle of the car to look through the windscreen. A couple of teenage kids were standing on the central reservation, one holding an AK47 in the air, the other pointing a pistol at the cars heading towards him, including our own. I couldn't tell if either of them were firing but they were obviously trying to get a car to stop. Nibras swerved right into the overtaking lane, putting the car in front of us between us and the youths, and we sped on. Julian and I turned to look at each other, speechless. *Had* they been firing at us?

We had no choice but to press on. Everyone was wide awake and looking around, now, Adil too. We started looking behind us, at last.

Then we saw them.

To my right were two white, open-backed Toyota pick-ups. One had two men with bandanas drawn over their faces in the rear, the

other just one man. All three were slightly off-balance, swaying on their feet and holding onto the cabins of the trucks as they raced to overtake us. As they drew level, we could see that each was carrying an AK47.

Whenever you read accounts of this sort of thing, people seem to say it all happened in slow motion. I think it's just a cliché, but even though these two vans were speeding past us, and now pulling in ahead to try to box us in, they seemed to take an awfully long time about it.

I distinctly recall screaming, 'Fucking slow down, Nibras! Let them get ahead… put some distance between us.'

Julian says this never happened, and that in fact it was he who shouted exactly those words.

Who knows? Maybe we both said it, maybe we both just thought it. It wasn't much of a solution anyway. They'd just have stopped as well. The pick-up containing the lone gunman was closest now, about ten yards in front of us. The other was ahead of it and pulling over to the left, perhaps to get a better shot at us.

There was silence in our car, Nibras desperately looking for a way out but with houses to our right and the damned concrete central reservation to our left we had nowhere to go but forwards.

The man on the back of the pick-up in front was now lowering his AK47 and beginning to take aim at our front windscreen, briefly taking his spare hand off the cabin to steady the barrel as he fingered the trigger.

My brain was fried with fear at that point, blasted from a state of slight unease, which I always felt, to sheer horror. It was a hundred times more terrifying than anything else I had ever experienced. I was absolutely sure I was about to die. I recall glancing across at Julian, a far braver man than me, and I remember his eyes and mouth being very wide open; I guess I must have been the same. I was very aware of my hands being clenched tight, as you might do at the dentist as you try to concentrate on something other than the drill or the needle, and I reeled between feeling utterly out of control, to deflated, to utterly resigned to death, to bracing myself for what was about to happen.

There was no thought of trying to grab Nibras's gun, or pull the steering wheel to make him ram one of the pick-ups, or do

something, anything, to try to influence the situation. Later, I would recall the words of B, after his unarmed colleague had disarmed and 'got rid of' the insurgents who were attacking his TV crew: *Some people get it wrong, back off, do nothing. You need the bottle and the brains to be aggressive and have a go at them and take them by surprise. Do what they're not expecting*. Well, we just backed off, doing nothing, that's for sure. But then we weren't former SAS troopers; we were just four utterly terrified blokes. Rabbits in the headlights. Useless.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a third vehicle coming up at speed on our right and settling in behind us. I turned: it was the people carrier from five minutes back along the road, and the men inside were staring at us and waving at us to stop.

I looked back, at the gunman in front of us; his finger was on the trigger of the AK and he was squinting along the barrel at us.

Suddenly, he lifted the rifle into the air and waved in anger as a big shape came between us. It was the people carrier; it had driven up alongside us, probably intending to force Nibras off the road, and was now between us and all three armed men.

Their mistake saved our lives, I'm absolutely sure of it.

At the same moment that the masked Iraqi was waving to his accomplices to get back out of his way, I felt our own car lurch, violently and at speed, to the left. I was thrown hard against the right-hand window as Nibras hurled the car through a 20 foot gap in the central reservation and handbrake-turned so we were facing back the other way on the other carriageway. It was a brilliant piece of driving. We swerved crazily for a second or two - thankfully the traffic on the other side missed us - and then started accelerating away, engine screaming and gravel and dust spraying everywhere. I looked in the rear view mirror; the three vehicles were already in the distance, speeding towards Iran, the bandana-wearing shooter waving, in fury now, at the people carrier.

We were all dumbstruck.

A minute or so later, Nibras muttered: 'It is important to be calm.'

I felt anything but calm. My entire body was soaked with sweat. I sat there, my head in my hands, looking at the floor of the car. I was shaking, shuddering like I had hold of a jackhammer. I glanced at Julian. He was the same. I don't believe either of us spoke a word.

A little further down the road, Nibras swore again, the same oath he had uttered earlier.

Looking up through the windscreen, I could see a group of five or six Iraqi teenagers in the central reservation, a couple of others running across the road. They were openly firing at cars and lorries coming the other way, and drivers were careering all over the carriageway to avoid being hit. Nibras pulled us alongside a large lorry, putting that between us and these new maniacs, and as he did so I could see people leaning out of the oncoming vehicles and firing back.

What unbelievable, lunatic anarchy had been unleashed here?

I'm not a religious person, but I was praying to see The Palestine again, unable to look any more, as Nibras flung the car from left to right, doing a hell of a speed and overtaking everyone in our way to get us out of this Wild East. I was in a daze of permanent fear; I remember a sense of amazement, of disbelief, that this had actually happened to us. I had seen rotting corpses dragged out of shallow graves, I had watched people being killed and horribly wounded close-up, I had interviewed the victims of the war. But none of it had really touched me; I'd been a journalist, a spectator, a voyeur, call it what you like, just doing my job. Today, that had all changed. Today I had become the target, with my friends, and we were incredibly lucky to be alive to tell the tale.

We arrived back at the hotel within 40 minutes, I guess. To be honest it's hard to tell. Nibras stayed outside to check his car for bullet holes or other damage and the three of us went to report what had happened to Bob and B. They compiled daily bulletins about what happened where and they needed to know that the Eastern Road to Iran was strictly off limits.

They were chatting in Bob's room. As we walked in, they saw our pale faces and shaking hands.

'Come on then,' said B. 'What happened?'

We told them.

'Fuck me,' he said. 'Well, at least you got out alive. You're just a walking cashpoint to them. Still. You lived to tell the tale eh lads?'

'You're very lucky,' said Bob. 'Classic *modus operandi*. Box you in, make you stop, force you out of the car, strip you, rob you, shoot you in the nut by the side of the road and someone from the people carrier fucks off in your motor.'

We nodded, like schoolboys in front of the headmaster.

'I'm running a convoy back to Jordan in a couple of days,' said Bob. 'No problem if you want to join up with us. You ought to think about it.'

We caught the dodgy lift back to our room and looked out of the window. Several of the tanks which had been parked nearby had gone, diverted to deal with the growing unrest in the city. We'd just had the biggest let-off of our lives, and the urge to get out wasn't just about homesickness, or boredom, or lack of stories in the paper any more.

Back at the room Adil was quiet. We asked how he felt.

'Nibras and I both agree with those men,' he said. 'We think you should go home. It is not safe for you here anymore. It is too dangerous for you. We want to work with you very much. You are our friends. But you have to go. We are not worried for ourselves. We are Iraqi and we are from tribes so we have protection. But you are not safe and if this happens again we might not be able to help you.'

This hit home even harder than the words of the experts. We were paying Adil and Nibras a small fortune. They needed the money, to put aside to help their families through the lean, hard times that were surely coming for them and their country. Adil was waving goodbye to that, for us. It was very moving.

Just then, Nibras walked into the room. He was shaking and his skin blanched almost to the colour of his white shirt.

He spoke rapidly in Iraqi to Adil, whose face turned grim. Both men sat on the floor, their heads in their hands.

Eventually, Adil looked up.

'Nibras just saw a woman taken from her car and shot to death, maybe five minutes from the hotel,' he told us. 'Four men dragged her from her car and emptied their guns into her while people watched. No-one helped her. Then they just drove off in her car and left her in the road.'

Tears were streaming down Nibras's face now. He looked at us, nodded and then shook his head and got up, walking out onto the balcony. I could see his shoulders heaving as he stood there.

'She was a member of the regime,' said Adil. 'Either she was married to somebody, or she was somebody. I don't know. What is

happening to my country, when they can do this in daylight so near to Americans?'

I hoped it was a rhetorical question. I certainly didn't have an answer for him.

Shortly afterwards, they both left and I started writing my account of what had just happened. I filed it without calling the desk, and checked in half an hour later.

The news editor Conor Hanna was just reading it.

'Are you OK, the pair of you?' he asked.

Conor comes from Belfast and cut his journalistic teeth covering the troubles there before coming to London. It takes a lot to impress him, but he sounded almost worried.

'Fine, thanks,' I said. 'Just a bit shaken up.'

'Piers has read the story and he wants you to get out of Baghdad as soon as possible,' he said. 'Come back to me and let me know how you're going to do it. Whatever you need, let me know.'

It had been Conor who had interrupted my cold beers on a beach in Doha during my CentCom all those weeks earlier. The order to get out of the city was as abrupt as the order to get in had been. I told Julian we were headed home. He just nodded. Next morning, we settled our bill with the hotel staff and said our goodbyes to our two Iraqi friends.

First there was a lot of stuff that we didn't need to take with us - a couple of hundred pounds-worth of food, some medical packs, dozens of bottles of clean water, 20 or 30 litres of petrol and our cooking gear. Nibras and Adil divided everything between them. Our small stove went to Adil, whose family was the poorer of the two, and a spare flak jacket that we had picked up along the way went to Nibras.

Adil shrugged and grinned as he handed it over to the driver. 'Nibras likes this sort of thing,' he said. 'He loves any gadgets and these military things.'

There were dozens of bars of chocolate for their kids and their eyes lit up like children when we handed them over.

'My daughter very pleased,' said Nibras, laughing.

Adil picked up a couple of dehydrated meals we had bartered from US troops and threw one at Nibras. 'What will your father say when he sees this?' he asked, chuckling. 'That we cannot spare the water?'

Clean water was so scarce in the country that the head of the family was the only one allowed to distribute it.

After the division of the spoils, we sat and talked for a while. I told Adil about my family, about my flat in London and my job. As I spoke, my eyes fell on his worry beads. 'I must remember to get some of those as a souvenir,' I said, half to myself.

Without a moment's hesitation Adil handed me his.

'I can't accept those, Adil,' I said. 'I shouldn't have said anything. I was just thinking out loud.'

He looked at me, hurt and upset. 'You insult me, Chris, when you say you will not take this thing,' he said, pressing them into my hand. 'Please, take them. Maybe they will bring you and Julian luck as you drive to Jordan. It is very dangerous in the desert now.'

Reluctantly, and apologetically, I accepted the beads. 'Thanks, Adil,' I said. 'You didn't need to give me them but I'm very grateful.'

They're now hanging in my living room at home.

Some time in the afternoon, Adil raised his eyes at Nibras. It was time for them to leave and they both stood.

'No kissing!' said Julian, jokingly.

'But, really, fellas - no kissing,' I said.

Middle Eastern men are a lot more demonstrative in their affection for each other than buttoned-up Englishmen like us. Adil and Nibras both grinned and hugged us in turn. We finished with a nice, firm, manly handshake and they were gone, weighed down with chocolate and other goodies.

That night, we had a beer down in the ITN room with the security guys.

We stood out on the balcony, the TV guys staying inside.

'Fair play to you guys after today,' said B. 'You've certainly seen the sights.'

'Very stupid, I think,' I said. 'I won't be doing that again.'

I stared into my drink, feeling very low.

Suddenly, Julian shook himself. 'Shit!' he yelled. 'The balcony's collapsing.'

He staggered towards the safety of the room.

B took his arm. 'No, mate, it isn't,' he said. 'You're just in shock.'

We looked at each other, starting to realise just how much the day's events had affected us. (Even now, when Julian and I occasionally talk about the experience it is fresh in my mind and I can still feel the fear of what happened.)

We carried on getting drunk with ITN, but we listened to them, not really joining in.

Our journey out of Baghdad started at dawn the next day, a six-car convoy, led by the armoured Land Rover that Bob drove all the way back to Amman.

We saw the odd people carrier and a few pick-ups, an unnerving sight despite the fact that, for once, we were travelling with a group of men who were armed to the teeth and knew what they were doing. But we were both absolutely exhausted - you don't realise how tiring it is to live under permanent stress and fear until you start to leave it behind - and before long we were sparked out, sleeping most of the eight hour journey to the border and, finally, the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman.

We checked in and I called my family to tell them I was out and all was well. Standing in my room, an air-conditioned paradise of fresh white sheets, hot running water and a gold-embossed room service menu, I looked at myself in the mirror. I'd lost half a stone in weight, my face was haggard, dirty and drawn and my clothes were ingrained with filth and streaky white salt stains. But I was alive and safe, and Baghdad seemed a very long way away.

For weeks, I'd dreamed about lying in a hot, sweet-smelling bath for hours. But there were beer and women downstairs. I hopped in the shower, scrubbed up and was in the bar in about three minutes. Julian was already there. We had more than a few beers, no luck at all with the women and spent the night listening to the chatter of excited American civilian contractors heading over the border to rebuild the country their government had wrecked.

We watched these guys chucking back Jack Daniels like it was going out of fashion and laughing raucously; it was another world.

One of them, a big, white lumberjack-looking man, turned to us at the bar.

'So what brings you here, fellas?' he asked.

We told him.

‘I’m heading into Iraq’ - he pronounced it Eye-rak, as they all seem to - ‘tomorrow. Part of Halliburton. Working on a major construction project.’

‘Whatever,’ said Julian, contemptuously.

‘Nice of Bush to smash the place to bits for you,’ I said. ‘Gives you something to do.’

I feel bad about that, now. He was making money out of the war and I thought that was wrong, still do. But he was being friendly enough and he hadn’t started the damn thing. There was no need for me to be so rude. It was a sign of how anti-American we’d become in our time over the border.

The office gave us a few days in Amman to calm down and get drunk before heading home.