

Haboob Wind –Chapter 1

The Exodus

In the early morning hours of December 11th, 2011, the air was crisp and cold from the overnight chill of the Iraqi Desert. The sunrise was a brilliant array of blended colors ranging from purple, red, and orange against a cloudless blue sky. The entire scene anywhere else would give a sense of peace and solitude, but in this location, was anything but that. The morning stillness was occasionally broken by several barking dogs and the low voices of groups of men discussing the events that were unfolding that day.

At roughly 0545 hrs. Captain James Hansen from Hampton Roads, Virginia looked at his olive drab patrol watch. Eight months before Deputy Sheriff James Hansen was working patrol in rural Virginia, Southwest of Washington, DC. when he was notified that his Virginia Army National Guard Unit C Company 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Stonewall Brigade) was being called to active duty in Iraq. This unit's lineage as reflected by its name stretches back to the American Civil War and the early days of the Virginia Militia. In fact, several members of the unit including the executive officer First Lieutenant Willis Schneider of Manassas, Virginia also descended from Civil War veterans. Lt. Schneider shared the name of his great-great grandfather Willis B Schneider, a Major with the 10th Virginia Infantry who was killed at Gettysburg nearly 150 years earlier while serving as a Brigade Commander during General Pickett's infamous charge on Cemetery Ridge.

This would be his and his National Guard Unit's second tour of active duty in three years, with the first being a deployment to Afghanistan in 2008. Now on active duty, he was serving as Company Commander in the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. Hansen and his men, who he called, "My Ginny Boys", would provide point security and reconnaissance protection for the United States Military's exodus from eleven years of involvement in the War Against Terror and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. His ten armored Humvees would be the tip of the spear if any trouble were to erupt on the long road back home. Cpt. Hansen and his command staff knew that the eyes of the world would be on this movement and their actions this day. Unbeknownst to Cpt. Hansen and his superiors ranging all the way to the White House, other eyes were watching this withdrawal intently.

Looking back at his watch again, it now read 0558 hrs. Instinctively, Cpt. Hansen turned to his Executive Officer and said, "Lieutenant, have the boys fire up and get ready!".

"Yes sir, Jimmy!", Lt. Schneider replied.

Cpt. Hansen then gave a small smile and slowly shook his head back and forth thinking to himself, "Willis how many times have I told you not to call me Jimmy in front of the men?". Cpt. Hansen then turned to his interpreter who had become his friend during this deployment to Iraq. They had often exchanged stories about life back in the States and the future of Iraq after American forces left. "Sheda I will miss you my friend, and if possible, maybe in the future we will see each other again?", Cpt. Hansen said while firmly shaking his interpreter's hand.

"We shall see what the future will bring us James, but until we see each other again, may Allah keep you safe.", the interpreter replied then slowly walked away from the convoy.

Looking down the line at the men standing next to their Humvees, some silent, some chatting, some laughing, Hansen thought to himself, "I'm going to miss seeing these boys every day when we get home.". He then knelt and scooped some Iraqi sand into a small baby food jar, thinking silently that he wanted to put it on his desk back home as a remembrance of these days and his men. He never wanted to forget them, and he knew his men felt the same for the most part. They were not just an Army combat team, they were also friends and family who had been through some remarkable experiences together. These feelings were not unique to this Army National Guard Unit but ran deep within all reserve units. Whether you were a Commander or a Private in the command structure, these were also your neighbors, coworkers, friends, and even family back home.

In the early morning of December 11th, 2011, Lt. Schneider picked up the microphone in his Humvee and made the broadcast that they and all America had been waiting to hear eleven years, "Spear Leader to Spear Two, over.".

The radio crackled back with the voice of Sergeant First Class William

Jennings of Richmond, Virginia the unit's First Sergeant, "Spear Two, go ahead, Over."

"Spear Two, fire them up Top. Have our boys keep their eyes open this morning, over.", Lt. Schneider replied. The morning stillness was then broken by the increased sound of men's voices and the roll of multiple engines being started. Dust was being kicked up along the highway as more dogs started barking and several birds flew away from the adjacent buildings. Captain Hansen looked back at his watch again and reached for his radio handset. With it now being 0600 hrs. Cpt. Hansen was now about to make history in his command Humvee and told his Ginny Boys to head out towards Kuwait.

One after another, the ten armored Humvees from Stonewall Brigade began to move heading down Highway 80 from Baghdad City on their nearly three-hundred-mile trip towards Kuwait.

The procession of Humvees was not even ten miles out of Baghdad when two US Army Apache attack helicopters flew over them at about 1000 feet providing air reconnaissance and support should they need it. As they moved down the infamous Highway 80, Cpt. Hansen thought to himself how ironic that they were on the famed "Highway of Death" from the first Gulf War in which the Coalition air forces lead by the United States had nearly annihilated the Iraqi Army in 1991. Hansen then silently whispered a prayer, "On this day Lord, please don't let history repeat itself!". Now, Cpt. Hansen and his men had more than those two Apache attack helicopters watching their back. Several USAF and CIA Drones were also flying surveillance of the exit route from as far as twenty-five miles on either side of the highway. In addition, US Department of Defense satellites had also turned their sights on this nearly 300, mile strip of highway. After the convoy had traveled approximately one hundred miles on the road back to Kuwait one of the lead scout trucks had a mechanical problem and the convoy had to stop. While mechanics looked at the Humvee a perimeter scout reported a reflection in the desert which could have been several clicks to their left and the report was relayed to Captain Hansen in his Humvee. Captain Hansen took note of the report and radioed the report to his brigade headquarters. The Apaches had headed back to their base to refuel and their replacements have not yet arrived to take over their duties covering the convoy.

Brigade headquarters advised they would see if the Air Force could send some aircraft to check out the sighting. The Air Force scrambled two F-15 Eagle fighters that were on patrol nearly 100 miles away. The two fighters were from the 144th Fighter Wing of the California Air National Guard in Fresno, California. Lt. Colonel Billy "Gutter" Adams radioed to his wingman Major Steve "Rocket" Randall "Rocket, I hope this is simple stuff, over."

"Roger that Gutter, we are too short for this." Major Randall answered with a chuckle.

"Roger that, I've got twenty plus in and my papers are going in when we get back to California.", "This Air Force is changing too much for me brother." Lt. Colonel Adams replied.

"Rocket, we are about 20 out let's drop down for a look, but all I see right now is desert and the convoy." Lt Colonel Adams radioed.

"Gutter I got the target at 2 O'clock it looks like the reflection is off the windshield of a wrecked truck". Major Randall advised.

"Roger that Rocket, I will come in behind you and confirm." Lt. Colonel Adams reported then added "Affirmative, a wrecked truck appears to be no threat.

With that Lt. Colonel Adams reported back of the status of the report and advised that they would remain in the area to support the convoy until the Apaches return. Shortly after Captain Hansen received the report of no threat in the area Lt. Schneider requested a radio and status report from all the other Humvees. In turn each Humvee reported back that there was no contact with insurgents or in fact anything suspicious at all outside of the reflection. Captain Hansen was then informed that the mechanical problem had been taken care of and the convoy could continue. As Cpt. Hansen looked at his map, he thought to himself, "Maybe this will really be a good day!", the convoy continued its exodus from Iraq.

While America's military and intelligence forces were focused on this exodus it had created the prefect distraction 100 miles away in Mosul where

insurgent forces were preparing to hold their first official meeting to plan the long-projected war planed against America. As the United States Army convoy began to move again and continued its way toward Kuwait a man in desert camouflage emerged from under the wrecked truck and made a call with his cell phone and along with many other hidden eyes were upon them along with the other convoys leaving Iraq that day. This would continue throughout the day as the vehicles would pass predesignated points along the highway reports would continue to flow out from burner cell phones. Each message which was sent by text was immediately destroyed to prevent the tracing of the messages. The status reports funneled back to the insurgency headquarters to an Al-Qaeda brigade commander with the code name of "Scorpion". This was assurance his day would be clear for the historic meeting with representatives of the various radical Islamic groups to formulate their plan for moving forward after the American military exit from Iraq. These various insurgent factions, despite their differences agreed to start to work together for a final solution to the "Great Devil" America.