

# The Road Home: Iraq In The Rear-View Mirror

BY NED PARKER  
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**THE ROAD TO KUWAIT** — Their Stryker, hulking in the dark like a dinosaur, is prepped with coolers full of water and Gatorade. The iPod is wired into the communications system. Now all they can do is wait for the ride their commanders have named "the last patrol."

It's just past midnight Monday at Camp Taji on the northern boundary of Baghdad. Staff Sgt. Shawn Sedillo chats with his gunner, Spc. Ben Longoria, and driver, Spc. Joseph LeFevre, who are smoking outside the motor pool. Sedillo's deputy, Sgt. Dennis Hill, naps inside their armored vehicle's box-like interior, grateful to get away from his hyper buddies. A friend brings them Taco Bell burritos and Burger King chicken tenders.

The men belong to the Army's 4th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, the last formal U.S. military combat detachment to leave Iraq after America's seven-year war. Over the course of three days, 360 military vehicles and 1,800 soldiers are taking the road through Baghdad and the Shiite south to Kuwait.

For these soldiers, the road out is marked with blood and regret for the years spent away from family. Sometimes the Iraqis welcomed them, sometimes they wished them dead. The sides remain unfathomable to each other even today; frustration and anger creep into the soldiers' tone, much as it did when troops first arrived years ago.

At 1 a.m., a dozen sergeants and lieutenants gather in a semicircle for their briefing about the route. "It's just another roll," a lieutenant says as one man packs a wad of tobacco into his mouth. He spits and the musty smell fills the air. "Take everything slow. It's the last mission. There's no reason for anyone to get hurt."

Sedillo, 35, grins. He's the senior scout who will lead the line of 16 Strykers from

Arrow Company, with an eye for possible bombs or ambushes. "I'm totally excited," he says. "We'll go right down the street."

It's dark still, but he gets pumped thinking about passing the garbage dump and squatter camp on the western edge of Baghdad they've named District 9, after the horror movie where aliens living in a refugee camp feed on cans of cat food.

He smiles again. "It's going to be awesome." Earlier that night, Sedillo sat in front of his trailer. He had arranged his pack, his guitar and M-4 assault rifle to tote them to the motor pool. Soldiers had burned their papers in barbecue grills; stray cereal boxes and Gatorade cans littered the ground.

Sedillo doubted he would miss the place. Since 2003, he had spent more time in Iraq than at his home in Colorado, with four tours under his belt. He has tried quitting the Army, but he always needed money for his family.

On his second night in Iraq, in May 2003, he was introduced to the violence that would define his life for the next seven years. Demonstrators had gathered outside the mayor's compound in the western city of Fallujah. Sedillo stood on the roof and watched the mob of Iraqis shouting in Arabic and throwing rocks.

"This is crazy and insane," he recalls thinking. He remembers a U.S. Army convoy pulling up and the roar of a .50-caliber machine gun firing. A man's head exploding, blood and brain matter spattering the crowd.

That summer, the company commander, Capt. Joshua Byers, and a platoon sergeant were killed while scouting near Fallujah in a Humvee. The captain's vehicle was dragged back to their base coated with blood. "That was reality right there. The first of many. We were taking casualties," he says. "We were pissed off. Mad. Real mad."

He spent the night that Thanksgiving in the pouring rain hunting for buried weapons in a field. In December, Saddam

Hussein was captured north of Baghdad and he thought: "Well, let's f--- go home. But we didn't go home. We stayed."

By the time his first deployment was finished in March 2004, his regiment had lost 93 soldiers in action. His unit was rushed back in early 2005, with the news of his redeployment coming on Valentine's Day. He told his wife, Happy Valentine's Day.

This time he promised he would bring all his men home. "But not everyone came home."

They were stationed in Tall Afar in northern Iraq, a nexus for armed groups coming in from Syria. His unit had been assigned to guard a hospital. They were resting between patrols when one of his men walked down the hall to the bathroom. Sgt. Jacob Simpson. A large explosion shook their room and they laughed, thinking it was nothing. A medic walked into the hallway and shouted, "Simpson is dead!"

Afterward, he kept replaying Simpson's death. "It's one of those things. If I had kept him in the room a little longer, he wouldn't have died. It was one of those random one-in-a-million shots."

Sedillo and his men crawl into the middle of their Stryker shortly after 1:30 a.m. LeFevre, 24, scoots to the front of the vehicle, to the steering wheel. Longoria pops his head up by his machine gun in the middle of the vehicle, shrouded with brown camo netting. Sedillo and Hill get in their turrets in the rear. Their feet dangle on benches inside the Stryker, their heads like rabbits surfacing from their burrows.

Sedillo writes the convoy's passenger count on his turret's thick bulletproof glass. He reads out a count of 71 passengers and five interpreters on the radio. They start to drive. Another officer comes on the headset, saying to take route Vernon. The Stryker moves at a crawl as the 15 other vehicles join in line.

Longoria, 24, blurts in a mock announcer voice:

"In a world where only soldiers do long drives to Kuwait, one truck is avoiding the zombie menace in 'Zombie Menace Ate My Iraqi Neighbors.'"

The three laugh on the radio. Hill, 32, stays quiet. Sedillo says: "You cannot put me in a bad mood right now." Longoria chimes in: "We're going faster than the speed of love."

"I'm going to Afghanistan," Hill interjects in a rare comment, speculating on his likely next deployment.

LeFevre cracks: "Yeah, you are going to Afghanistan and then Iran."

Longoria knows his years in Iraq have changed him. "If I survive the next two years, I want to do something else," he says. "He's been writing a novel since he was a teenager. It's epic. It's huge. I want to rival Tolkien," he says. He calls it "A Death Solar," the story of a man who doesn't know he is the devil's son, and is tricked into conquering the universe for his father.

He and LeFevre have written heavy-metal songs based on the book and have formed a band, A Death Solar. Their songs have names like "The Allure of Death."

In April, Longoria's wife told him via Yahoo messenger that she wanted a divorce.

She said he had changed too much and she wanted her independence. He knew things had been tense but it stunned him. They have a little girl and boy and had been high school sweethearts. "I was a really nice and happy kid before the Army," he says.

The convoy picks up speed. The Strykers are paced anywhere 30 to 60 feet apart, lumbering along like a pack of huge armadillos. They pass the plains surrounding Baghdad's northern edge, move past the shuttered metal shops, butcher shops and factories from the Saddam era that have been left like carcasses on the road.

They skirt the edge of Baghdad's Shoula slum, home to Shiite militias who regularly lay powerful bombs for U.S. troops. This is the place Sedillo calls District 9. No bombs explode and the crew is visibly relieved.

To celebrate their escape from District 9, Longoria booms Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the speakers. Everyone but Hill sings.

"Mama, just killed a man  
Put a gun against his head  
Pulled my trigger, now he's dead  
Mama, life had just begun  
But now I've gone and thrown it all away."

They carry on in call and response, with falsettos and deep baritones, for the entire song. All the time they scan the road for the rare truck swinging by.

As sunlight creeps up, power lines stand in the distance. "I feel like I'm on Tootsie," Longoria says, and the three men start humming the theme to "Star Wars."

"Ladies and gentlemen, composer John Williams and the London Symphony Orchestra," LeFevre announces.

The group can sense they're closing in on the crossing into Kuwait. K Crossing. They reach a simple gate with concrete barriers and fences. Two officers salute them and a sport utility vehicle leads them inside the border area. No one whoops or hollers. All focus on the task of cleaning up their vehicles.

Sedillo fishes for a canvas bag of bullets and sits in the mouth of the Stryker clearing magazines and gathering trash.

All of them are tired but they can't resist playing "Bohemian Rhapsody" a final time. Longoria leans back in his turret, his feet kicked up. Sedillo taps his fingers. They strain for the high notes.

"Just gotta get out, just gotta get right outta here."

Nothing really matters. Anyone can see. Nothing really matters. Nothing really matters to me.

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