

A Journey to Baghdad



In preparation for my posting to Iraq, I had spent a month racing around getting myself trained, jabbed and briefed as well as leaving everything in place (including presents for everyone) so that the family would be organised enough to survive Christmas and New Year without me. I felt exhausted, so started my journey to Baghdad with a detour to Riyadh. It was there that I managed to relax a little with David and catch up with old friends and colleagues. I also thoroughly enjoyed dining and dancing at the RGBB Christmas Ball. But this was only possible after a last minute dash to M & S. Although I had brought a posh frock with me, I had forgotten to pack suitable underwear - or rather, thought that I would not need any party wear in Iraq.

After a week, I said goodbye to David and flew off to Kuwait with mounting trepidation. Was I mad? A bad wife for leaving her husband? An irresponsible mother for abandoning her children? A thoughtless daughter for putting her mother through so much anxiety? Perhaps I should turn back now? But the thought of the chance to embark on such an adventure and do a job I knew I would enjoy so much was a strong pull. I spent a day in Kuwait waiting for the call to say that the RAF would indeed be flying and I'd be off on the next leg of the journey. Luckily, I met up with two fellow travellers who were returning to Iraq after R&R. One I already knew, and so it was good to latch on to others who 'knew the ropes.' Suddenly, we were in a car and on our way to the military airport, a tiny section of which is given over to the RAF. In a dusty trailer, we received body armour and 'checked in' for the flight. We then waited, with various military personnel and bits of

equipment, in an enormous hanger watching live Strictly Come Dancing on BFBS TV until our flight was called. This turned out to be the first of many surreal moments.

It is not until you walk into the back end of a C-130 Hercules, do you realise just how enormous they are. We shuffled along to the far end in cumbersome body armour and sat down on a long bench, which ran back to back with another bench down the centre of the aircraft facing the sides. There were also benches along either side facing into the centre. Once strapped in, I had a chance to look around. I spotted the certain bowl shaped "receptacle" right at the front and was immediately thankful that I'd taken the advice to go to the loo before boarding! A soldier passed around ear plugs and pointed to the strapping and webbing behind us and overhead. This was not only used to stow equipment and personal belongings but was a convenient grab handle during the sometimes almost vertical takeoff and landing. All too soon, I was hanging on to this strapping and fumbling underneath my helmet, in near total darkness, frantically trying to stuff the earplugs in my ears.

Once we were horizontal and the noise muffled somewhat, my eyes adjusted in the dim, greenish glow. We were three civilians amongst a sea of uniforms, sat in rows facing each other but not really seeing each other. It was plain to see that we were all lost in deep thought, some plugged into ipods, perhaps thinking about what lay ahead and family left behind. Was it easier, or worse, for those that had made this journey before? It was getting serious now and, despite the noisy engine sounds, the atmosphere was one of eerie mental silence.

I was hanging on the straps, as we were vertical again, this time in descent. I guessed we must be in Iraq and approaching Basra. The landing was surprisingly soft. People and equipment got off and others got on, and after ninety minutes we were airborne once more for the short hop to Baghdad.

Where are they now?

Lynn Waring, who was previously Management Officer at the British Embassy in Riyadh has written to tell us of her first experiences in getting to the new office!

Below:
Meeting the President

