

Assignment Iraq: Grin and Bear It

Saturday, March 18, 2006



You've heard it said that sometimes getting there is half the fun? Well, it has been loads ... a veritable barrel of laughs.

It's not like it started out well. It didn't.

We boarded the plane and then left the gate at Kansas City International about 45 minutes late. Then the pilot announced that "there would be a slight delay" because of a storm moving through the area. The "slight" delay turned out to be an understatement.

About four hours worth of understatement.

A massive storm system, born in Texas, raged its way northeast, right through America's midsection, all the way up to Illinois. As in Chicago ... O'Hare Airport.

O'Hare was closed, shut down tight. And it just happened to be the destination of yours truly. The place where I needed to go in order to switch flights to London, then to Kuwait.

Did I mention the trip was a barrel of laughs?

I started giggling when the 52-minute flight to Chicago stretched into two hours ... after another half-hour in the air, I began to laugh. It was funny.

The pilot finally found courage enough to announce that we would be touching down in St. Louis instead of our intended destination. The news was received with equal jocular joy amongst my fellow travelers. Smiles all around.

Okay, we get dumped in St. Louis to fend for ourselves. No one at the gate to provide vouchers or assistance in re-scheduling missed connections ... a mighty fine time.

Red-eyed, rump-weary and cheesed, I managed to grab a cab and find a motel. Once at the motel, I got on the phone and went through all the necessary motions to get on a

different flight. After very few hours of sleep, I made my way back to the airport, flew to Boston and then to London via British Airways.

Heathrow was chaotic and confusing. I had a ten-hour layover, so I grabbed a room and caught five hours of decent sleep. The flight to Kuwait was relatively uneventful.

The laughs just kept on coming. I made it to Kuwait, but my baggage didn't.

Waiting to obtain travel orders to Iraq, I had more time to kill. So being curious as to my new environs, I decided to walk around and get a sense of the place. Wasn't too long before my wanderings had me good and lost. It's a good thing Kuwait is civilized and modern with very friendly people. I had the opportunity to speak with a number of people who live there, most of whom weren't Kuwaitis (only 38% of people living there are Kuwaitis).

As in any metropolitan area, if you need the inside scoop, you talk to someone driving a hack. The cabbie I spoke with at length, was in Kuwait back in August of 1990 - when bad-guy Saddam Hussein sent his army of invaders into oil rich Kuwait. He spoke of the subsequent seven-month occupation and how brutal it was. He remembers how Kuwaiti citizens were tortured and murdered by Saddam's thugs. He talked about how they robbed, raped and pillaged his country.

And he spoke of the pathological final act. When day turned into night, the sun obliterated by oily smoke. He recounted how Iraqi troops set Kuwait's oil fields on fire before hightailing it out with their tails between their legs.

The invasion of Kuwait may be ancient history to most of us. But that's why Operation Desert Storm was launched. It may be ancient history to us, but it's not to the cabbie, his family or friends. They remember the days of invasion. They remember the days of terror and torture ... the ruthlessness of occupying Iraqi forces.

And they remember living next door to Saddam Hussein.

Our nation went to war to free Kuwait. Americans died during that war, and we sure as hell need to remember that.

The bottom line is this: Saddam started that whole rotten mess. Bad guys never turn into good guys. We need to remember that, too.

Next stop ... Iraq

