NO ONE IS GOING THROUGH
WHAT WE ARE GOING THROUGH

12 July 2004 | SADR CITY, BAGHDAD, Iraq

On June 23, in Sadr City, on a busy street in the middle of the day, the people and traffic disappeared. Spotters for the al-Mahdi Army had seen the Americans coming in their convoy and signaled the fighters, who were ready to shoot from alleys and rooftops. As the street cleared out, a heavy soldier named Barron was yelling over to me in the back of the last Bradley. We were inches apart. It was over 100 degrees inside and the air was filled with ochre dust and the sound of the heavy tracks slamming against their metal stops. Barron screamed and pointed at the green screen, one of the few connections to the outside world. “See that? No people. That’s bad.”

Seconds after he said it, the street around the Humvees disappeared in clouds of dust where the al-Mahdi Army bullets hit the ground. The dust came up around the wheels. It looked like the Humvees were sinking. The heavy guns on the vehicles shuddered. Gunners standing up in the Humvees were returning fire, but it was hard to see if they hit any of the al-Mahdi fighters who were trying to hit the convoy. It was a gun battle on an empty street against invisible men. The U.S. convoy moved on down a few hundred feet and turned a corner. When the firing started again, one of the Bradley commanders spoke in rapid sentences over the radio. “We got some con-tact ...” We kept moving.

When we drove into the ambush, the 1st Cavalry soldiers were on their way to meet the Iraqi police and search an arms dealer’s house. As the convoy

arrived at the dealer's street, the four Iraqi police trucks slowed down but didn't stop. The Iraqis were supposed to conduct the search while the Americans provided security. Sgt. Reggie Butler, a young African-American in charge of the 1st Platoon, was laughing when he watched the Iraqi police take off. "I was calling over the radio, 'Red 4 to Red 2, you see any IP's? You see any IP's?'" Butler parked his Bradley so that the police couldn't get past the American cordon but they found a way through, inching past the Bradleys on the median. "They squeezed right between us, then eight Humvees went chasing after them."

From the second Bradley, I watched the white police pickups edge past the alley where the arms dealer lived and then disappear, leaving Butler's vehicle exposed to the narrow passage. Butler was blocking the alley when his gunner turned to see an Iraqi pull the trigger on a rocket launcher. With the Iraqi police missing and the locals firing rockets at the convoy, Alpha Company abandoned the cordon-and-search and headed for the base at 50 miles an hour, narrowly missing a roadside bomb. When we got back, I asked Lt. Derek Johnson, the 1st Platoon leader, what happened. He only said, "Yeah, that was a real cluster fuck," and then walked back to his barracks exhausted.

On April 4 when the mass uprisings began across Iraq, Sadr City, which had been relatively calm, suddenly became one of the most violent places in the country. The 1st Cavalry had just taken over a few days earlier and had no idea what to expect. When it

finally happened, the carefully planned Mahdi Army offensive caught them off guard. Sadr City is not like the rest of Baghdad; it has its own identity, a collective mind that can become violent or joyful in an instant. You quickly get the feeling that everyone knows everybody else. It is a poor place but that does not capture it. Sheep graze on the medians, which are heaped with

garbage. Thin young men sell black-market gasoline and cigarettes on the sidewalk, and there is the sound of vendors yelling in the white sun. Ruined avenues branch out into thousands of narrow alleyways full of children. When the residents decided to rise up against the U.S., it happened quickly.

Now, after months of continuous fighting, young men in the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment have experienced some of the highest casualties of any unit in post-invasion Iraq, with a number of soldiers receiving multiple Purple Hearts. Two are still on duty. There's a fatalistic joke going around the barracks that goes, "If you get five Purple Hearts, you get to go home." More than 30 members of Alpha Company have been wounded in action, and those who haven't been describe miraculous near-misses outside the base. For Alpha Company soldiers, these are bad odds, and they get worse in light of the current administration's policy -- fewer U.S. soldiers in Iraq means greater stress for those sent into it, soldiers out on constant patrols, working vast areas of operation. Here, there are fewer than 600 U.S. soldiers patrolling a hostile city of 2 million people.

On April 4 alone, Charlie Company, one of the units that patrols Sadr City, took 17 casualties. Alpha Company, the second unit to be caught in the Mahdi Army offensive, sustained 13 casualties with two deaths. Alpha Company was trying to rescue soldiers from Charlie Company when they were also pinned down by Mahdi fighters. The result of the ambush was a bloodbath. U.S. soldiers were riding in a large open truck that provided no cover from the attack. "That was a bad day," Reggie Butler told me. "Everybody who thought they were hard, they thought again after that."

Living in a permanent state of dread, many of the men in the Alpha Company barracks are distant and sullen, unable to trust a recent lull in the fighting. "I don't like cease-fires," a medic named Andrew Lamkin said. "It just gives them time to prepare." The war in Sadr City has paused for a delicate cease-

fire while the Shiite firebrand and leader of the Mahdi Army, Moqtada al-Sadr, maneuvers for leverage with an embryonic Iraqi government. It will start up again whenever he feels he is being ignored. I asked a contact who works as an intelligence officer in the Mahdi Army about the prospects for the cease-fire and he said, “It can break down at any time. Instantly.”

Reggie Butler led his platoon on the relief mission for the Charlie Company convoy trapped in the city-wide ambush on April 4. He went out twice that day, trying to rescue trapped soldiers. The cadences and rhythms in his voice are Southern -- he does not have any of the nervous intensity of men from cities; he is measured and clear. Butler is also honest and soft-spoken, a quality that draws the other soldiers to him. Only 30, he has been married twice and speaks Albanian, which he picked up on his peacekeeping mission in the Balkans. Butler’s wife is German and she is in Europe with his daughters, waiting for him to return.

In his room at the base in Sadr City, as Butler began telling me the story of what happened on April 4 he was calm and even. But once he got going, he talked without pausing for two hours. His account of April 4 reminded me of torture victims curing themselves though speech, a deliberate purging of events from his mind. Stories poured out of him. The most wrenching part of Butler’s experience was the death of his close

friend, Spc. Ahmed Cason, who was shot as he stood in the Humvee gunner’s well a few inches away. Butler, along with the other members of the platoon, had taken several turns, heading deeper into the city where the fighting intensified, driving into what would quickly become a citywide ambush. When he described how much shooting was coming down from the rooftops, Butler pantomimed rain.

“Some guys were frozen, scared, they were gone, they were just lost. That’s when Cason was hit. After he got hit, he dropped down, then he got back up and started shooting. I didn’t think he was hurt that bad. Then he dropped down and he was bleeding all over the Humvee. Crabbe, the medic, started pulling off his clothes, doing first aid. I asked how he was doing and Crabbe told me, ‘We need to get him out right now.’” The entire city was firing from the buildings on the broad avenues. One Alpha Company gunner told me, “You could see the battlefield just opening out in front of your eyes. It was amazing,” and he shook his head in disbelief.

After Cason was shot, Butler and his team spent the next 15 minutes being ambushed and unable to move. While they struggled to get out, Cason was bleeding to death. “Cason came to me and asked to be in my crew in Iraq; he said, ‘If we go to Iraq I want to be in your vehicle.’ So I made it happen,” Butler said. He was working on a slide show for Cason when I walked into his room to talk about April 4.

Butler wrote a powerful and simple eulogy that was read at the fallen-soldier ceremony for Cason. Butler’s computer is full of pictures he’s taken during the war. There is a snapshot of Cason drinking beer; there are pictures of Cason’s fallen-soldier ceremony. After knocking on Butler’s door, I realized I had stumbled into a memorial in progress. Butler was sitting on his bed talking, surrounded by cards from home, the archivist and conscience of the platoon.

As he described the route his Humvee took through the roadblocks that day, he did not exaggerate or use the saccharine rhetoric of liberation; he described events in concrete terms. There is a straightforward reason for this -- Butler is trying hard, along with the other members of Alpha Company, merely to live through Sadr City.

He has a long way to go.

As it has with many other frontline soldiers serving in Iraq, the military has "stop- lossed" Butler, which means that he is not allowed to leave the Army until the Iraq deployment is over and his unit is replaced 10 months from now. If the cease-fire with the al-Mahdi Army breaks down, the odds that he will make it through without serious injury spike sharply downward. Worse yet, senior officers at Camp Eagle have been leaning on him to reenlist. "You know, they tried to really guilt-trip me, saying, 'The military has spent a lot of money training you.'"

In the abstract universe of military balance sheets, this is true -- Butler explained he is one of only six sergeants of his rank who has graduated from the elite Ranger school and is also qualified as a master gunner. But after going out on missions with him, I began to understand that the real reason the commander wants to keep him is that the 1st Platoon might not survive his departure. It is Reggie Butler's indispensability that makes him so dispensable. Catch-22.

On June 27, four days into my stay on the base, Butler was coming out of the command post for Alpha Company just as I was going in. He asked me if I was going out in the

afternoon. I said yes, I was joining a mission to the Sadr City power substation to ask the engineers what they needed in way of supplies. "Well, if you get into anything, I'm the one coming out for you," Butler said.

After leaving the substation, the Bradleys threw comet trails of dust down the street and then stopped to perform a snap checkpoint, which involves choking off the traffic in both directions, while Iraqi soldiers searched cars full of young men. As soon as the Bradleys pulled up on the wide median,

a crowd gathered on each side of the road to watch the Americans. When the Iraqi soldiers went over to perform crowd control, the young men on the street started to jeer and taunt them, calling the Iraqi soldiers traitors and collaborators.

I watched one young Iraqi soldier named Hosham stand in front of 50 jeering residents, shouting back at them because he couldn't take their insults. The boys in the crowd started singing the al-Mahdi Army song in which they pledge to spill their blood for Moqtada. When Hosham finally pulled the bolt back on his Kalashnikov, the crowd only found worse taunts. Hosham stood in front of the gawkers, held his rifle in the air, pulled the trigger and fired a burst that echoed off the houses. Everything changed. The sidewalk crowd fell silent, then drew back and became an angry mob. The vendors selling gasoline on the sidewalk raised their fists and neighborhood men started to come out of their houses. The crowd grew.

A single U.S. soldier walked across the street, apologized to the bystanders and took the rifle from the Iraqi soldier, dragging him back to the Bradleys. He said to him, "If you put your finger on that trigger, I will shoot you myself, OK?" The translator translated and the ICDC soldier, who was little more than a boy himself, nodded his head. They had shamed him.

After the ICDC soldier with the wounded sense of honor fired his rifle into the light and heat of Sadr City, we piled quickly back into the Bradleys and drove a few blocks until the vehicle in front of us threw a wheel and broke down. It was intensely depressing. No vehicle in the convoy could leave until the damaged machine could roll under its own power. To pass the time I talked to the kids who darted out to the median when they saw the U.S. soldiers. "Write 'Moqtada is good,'" a 9-year-old said. "Write it." I made a show of taking notes, then asked him his name. "Moqtada!" the thin kid with a shock of brown hair shouted. "My name is Moqtada!" The other boys

laughed, elbowed one another and stared. I asked another young boy standing next to the first kid for his name. “Moqtada!” And you? “Moqtada!” Seven boys said their names were Moqtada, and thought it was most serious joke in the world. The seven Moqtadas vanished back into the alleys.

Meanwhile, the soldiers from Alpha Company were getting nervous at being exposed for such a long time on the street. Staying anywhere on the street longer than 15 minutes provokes great unease because that is roughly the amount of time it takes for the Mahdi fighters to find their positions. The crew of the broken-down Bradley couldn’t fix the missing wheel, so we waited, surrounded by a growing mob. The U.S. soldiers were in combat positions waiting for incoming fire when Butler rolled up in his Bradley. Five minutes later, Butler and another sergeant named Pitts got the damaged machine moving again and we were free.

The next morning, Lt. Johnson, Butler’s commanding officer, stood at the ramp of the one of the Bradleys with the other sergeants in the platoon. The pallid Johnson wears square glasses with thick black frames; he speaks in a monotone and mumbles. He was holding a map with the patrol route marked out in red ink. When he read the names of the streets -- Silver, Aeros, Maryland, Delta, Grizzlies, the American names for a grid of broad avenues in Sadr City -- the men leaning on the Bradley ramp all gasped. “Grizzlies? Not route Grizzlies. Oh, great, that’s just fucking great,” one soldier said.

The crew standing around the Bradley were sick with dread. Butler then asked Johnson directly, “You’re sure about this?”

“Yeah,” Johnson said without looking at him.

“You checked with the commander?”

"Well, it comes from headquarters, so the commander has to know about it."

"But you're sure about the route, this is what they gave you?"

Butler was trying to figure out who set up the patrol. Johnson said it wasn't his idea.

The crews of the four Bradleys in the platoon were watching Butler to see what he would say. Johnson was invisible to them.

"That's not a good route. I don't feel good about it," Butler said to Johnson.

The young lieutenant looked miserable and helpless but didn't change the plans; he adjusted his glasses. He was only the map bearer, the reluctant middle manager, who knew before he walked out to the crews that over much of the planned route they had been ambushed or hit by roadside bombs. One street on the route is known to be mined with improvised explosives.

Butler instantly understood that the officers in the operations center had given the 1st Platoon the worst patrol in the Shia ghetto, a loop around the entire northern side of the city. It was also a provocative one. The Bradleys would go within blocks of the al- Hekma mosque, a place where the al-Mahdi Army has laid many ambushes and constantly fires at American patrols. This mosque is the pulpit for al-Mahdi Army clerics on Fridays when the street fills with thousands of followers who pray outside in the sun. Angry sermons go out over the loudspeakers while young boys with water sprayers cool the kneeling crowd. Across the ruined avenue from the Hekma mosque someone

had spray-painted VIETNAM STREET in tall black letters on a blank stretch of wall.

Al-Mahdi spotters with rifle scopes watch for the approach of American convoys from the roof of the mosque. Farther down the route, Butler would pass through the site of the April 4 ambush, where the men would get out of the vehicles and perform a snap checkpoint. At each of the stops, someone fired a few shots from a rifle. “When you hear that pop-pop from an AK, they are tracking you. That’s how they tell everybody where you are,” a gunner explained. The invisible men were watching us and holding their fire. Three hours later, the cease-fire hadn’t collapsed and Butler’s platoon had only had to endure a hail of rocks thrown by Iraqi boys. They had trouble believing their good luck.

An al-Mahdi Army fighter I know named Muhanned, a young man I met two months ago in a Sadr City safe house, had told me how he was fighting the Americans in the area around the Hekma mosque, the central meeting place for the Mahdi Army leaders. Muhanned is the leader of a cell of young men in his neighborhood who move around, mostly at night, waiting for U.S. patrols and then ambushing them. Muhanned’s technique is to attack and then disappear into the alleyways. When I learned about Butler’s routes through Sadr City, it was clear that there was a connection -- Muhanned and his cell were attacking Butler’s company. Butler patrols the area around the mosque, as he has done for months, and Muhanned lives inside Alpha Company’s area of operations, planning and executing ambushes. The two men are joined by the invisible current of the war but they do not know each other. In coming to know both men I cannot shake the feeling that the conflict in Sadr City is nothing more than an unnecessary machine for mass-producing grief.

The vehicles in the Camp Eagle graveyard tell part of the Alpha Company story: Humvees with blown-out windshields, direct hits with rocket propelled grenades on windshields and doors, two burned Bradleys, other Humvees destroyed by roadside bombs. Rocket impacts give the steel a moth-eaten look. The million-dollar equipment is ragged, pushed to the edge from overuse. A number of the soldiers from Alpha Company who were in them during the attacks talk about recurring nightmares, trouble sleeping. Butler said he still had dreams about April 4 and the other bad days that followed. I asked Butler if Iraq was what he expected. “I didn’t think it would be like this. No one is going through what we are going through,” he told me.

On the morning of June 28, the Coalition Provisional Authority announced the transfer of sovereignty to Iraq, dissolving itself. It didn’t amount to much beyond a political abstraction for Butler. The only development that matters to him is the cease-fire. Nothing else has changed -- he still has to take his platoon out on patrol, he still has to worry about an armed insurgency and ambushes. “They just don’t want us here,” Butler said. “I hope that all of us make it back. I pray that we all do, but I don’t think it could get any worse. This is worse. I’ll do everything I can to bring all the soldiers back. Anything.” ■