

## WARRIOR

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'Then why are you here?'

It wouldn't happen in our gaff.

The MI6 man was talking about a green box. Apparently it held secrets about the WMDs. We were to keep our eyes and ears open and make every possible effort to find it.

We looked at each other.

'Do we know what's in this green box?' someone asked.

'I can't tell you any more about it,' he replied. 'It's classified information.'

The Jock on the front gate is more on the ball than you lot, I thought. We had made lots of local contacts and we knew the score: the real problems were murder, rape, looting and Iran – not nuclear warheads.

JP explained that we had to take control of the steel factory. 'You must stop the looting and lock the place down,' he said. 'Then the engineers will come and search for the bunkers.' I was sceptical about the WMDs but felt complimented that we'd been selected for the mission. At least it would be good for the country to stop the thieving; the steel could be used to rebuild the roads and bridges that we'd bombed.

We decided to take the Ali Babas by surprise and deploy the whole company in the dead of night. We left the recce platoon a kilometre behind us as a reserve force and sped into the factory with a dozen Land Rovers. We passed three times as many donkey-drawn carts on their way out. Their drivers didn't so much as give us a second look.

Then we got a grip when our Warriors and other heavy metal rolled in, blocking all the exits. Inside the factory, people were operating cranes to lift bundles of steel rods onto articulated lorries. The trucks looked new and had probably been nicked from Kuwait or Jordan. The stolen steel was fetching good prices in Baghdad and Iran. It was an astonishingly well-organised business.

Our interpreters used loudhailers to make an announcement: 'You are all under arrest and your vehicles will be confiscated.' The looters looked stunned. For weeks, they had been robbing the place with

## THE GREEN BOX

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impunity. Sporadic shots rang out but we didn't reply. Most of the looters resisted arrest and fists, boots and sticks were swung before we had more than 100 of them in plasticuffs. I allocated a huge open-top truck with high sides for the prisoners. I hurried back to it when I heard screaming. Many of the Jocks had been cut and bruised in the struggle and now some were getting revenge, lifting the Iraqis onto the truck by their balls or their hair. I put a stop to this.

Donkeys charged off in a braying din as we cut them loose with a smack on the arse. In the crazy weeks ahead, I sometimes caught the Jocks having chariot races with captured steeds.

That night, we sent hunting parties to catch a few of the hundreds of Iraqis still hiding in the factory. We also took 15 confiscated trucks back to camp. It was surreal: I had come to fight a war and now I was driving a truck full of steel. We kept the vehicles in our car park, from where they would be taken to Camp Breadbasket. After a couple of hours, we released all the prisoners. 'Next time, you'll go to Umm Qasr jail,' I told them. 'You've got five minutes to get out of sight or we'll rearrest you.' I watched them scarpers up the road.

In the morning, we surveyed the vast factory, an ocean of valuable metal spread out before us. Engineers came to look for hidden entrances and we opened a guardroom in a little building at the entrance. We still had to police al-Hayaniyah so we set up a rota of call signs to cover the factory. As we reduced our presence, the Iraqis began to pour back in. Our instructions were not to shoot unless we were shot at but we didn't have enough riot gear or men to do the job decisively. Night after night, armed with pick axes (pickaxe handles), we fought the Iraqis in running battles, like rival football fans.

One night, as Lee drove me down a long steel-lined aisle, we spotted a group of looters, who ran off. As we reached the slowest, I jumped on his back while Lee chased the others. I dragged the man to the ground but he fought back ferociously and then two of his mates appeared. Soon I knew I was fighting for my life. I had never felt so scared. At one point, the big guy was behind me with his hands inside my mouth while his mates swung lumps of metal

## NATURAL CAUSES

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to it. When Tam brought back these tools of torture, a wave of revulsion swept the camp.

When we removed the sandbag from his head, our captive seemed unfazed. He was a sturdy man in his late 40s. Stripped to his underwear for a medical examination, he displayed tattoos everywhere from his neck down. It was as if a child had scribbled Arabic letters, arrows and dots all over him. He got dressed and was taken to the cage.

'What is your name?' I asked him through an interpreter, who stood behind him, out of his sight. 'What is your date of birth? What do you know about the kidnappings of young children in your area?'

Instead of answering me, the prisoner became agitated, babbling about his innocence. His hands were cuffed but he lunged at me and I took his feet from under him. The guards picked him up and I told him to stay standing for a while. 'Make sure he doesn't move,' I told the guards. When I came back an hour later, he had calmed down. I got his name and date of birth and allowed him to sit down.

That afternoon, a Scottish journalist visited the camp. Tam Salter and I showed him the manacles and the club. 'I came here to fight a war and now we're dealing with child killers,' I said. The journalist went around the camp to talk to Jocks in their platoon quarters. I was in the ops room when one of the POW guards rushed in, flustered and breathless. 'Sir, there's a problem in the cage. The prisoner who came in this morning is dead.'

'What the fuck?' I said. 'Go and get the medic, now!'

I found someone to cover for me in the ops room and rushed to the cage. The prisoner was lying on his back with white foam around his mouth. There were dirty marks all over his light-coloured dishdash.

'What's gone on here?' I asked the Jocks.

'He just started rolling about on the floor,' one said, 'and then he went very quiet. He must have had a fit.'

The medic checked his heart and pulse and declared the man dead. 'We can't leave the body lying here,' he said. 'We'd best take it to the morgue.'

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Turning to the Jocks, I said, 'I am reporting this to the RMP. What you tell them will determine whether or not you are going to spend the next 20 years in prison. So you'd better not have done anything wrong.'

I went to tell James, who was deep into writing a report on the operation.

'Fuck me, that's drama,' he said. 'What about the guy from the press?'

The last thing we wanted was the journalist sniffing around. I sat him down for a chat while he waited for his lift back to HQ. He was facing me with his back to the main gate as a bizarre scene unfolded behind him. A stripped-down Land Rover pulled up and the driver went to check out with the sentry. In the back of the wagon, with a strap across his chest to keep him upright, sat the deceased prisoner. We were out of body-bags. The Jock returned to the vehicle and I glared at him intently. Taking advantage of my predicament, he took hold of the corpse's head and moved it like a ventriloquist's dummy: 'We're just checking out now, sir.' Very funny, I thought – if we hadn't had a serious investigation on our hands.

Two days later, a team of four officers from the SIB arrived. They were also investigating Tommo's accident. I answered all their questions but they focused less on the prisoner's death than on the fact that he had been sandbagged on arrest.

'Why was the prisoner hooded?' they asked.

'That's what we've been told to do,' I said. 'Look, I've had no formal training on any of this,' I added.

They quizzed James about the hooding and he dug out a frago (a radio order) from battalion HQ clearly authorising this practice.

On 12 May, we went with the SAS to raid a couple of houses. We were after some Fedayeen generals who might lead us to the green box. We blocked off a street and James and I took one house while the SAS stormed another. There were only women in our house. I showed them a photograph of our target and they denied that he lived there. Then I caught one of them hiding an AK-47