INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

TCG-17

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Dear Peter,

Here it is at last--a draft of Chapter One of my adventures as a relief worker in Kurdistan. You have already received several other chapters or portions thereof as part of newsletters--The Yezidis, Travels with the General, Hotel Baghdad, etc. I include an outline at the end that you may or may not want to include as part of this newsletter. It feels like everything is falling into place at last.

The Confessions of a Rogue Relief Worker: Kurdistan

MIDNIGHT MIDWIVES IN CAMP RED EYE

Late April, 1991

The news comes crackling over the radio phone that a bus load of pregnant Kurdish women has just crossed the border and headed our way.

The disembodied voice on the far end of the line then adds a detail, almost as an afterthought:

Behind the first bus are ten others, each packed with 100 more men and women and children, children and more children.

All have been traveling for more than ten hours from the wretched mountain camps in Turkey to our newly established Displaced Iraqi Persons (DIP) Center outside Zakho in Northern Iraq.

We call it Camp Red Eye.

Set up by the American military and its Gulf War allies in the Safe Haven zone, the camp was created with the aim of convincing the half million Kurds who fled Iraq in the aftermath of their failed March rebellion that they can come home, and in safety.

But Red Eye has been perhaps too successful as a lure:

Designed for 5,000 people, we are already up to 20,000 and growing each day and in the most unmilitary, chaotic manner:

At first, the Kurds came in groups of ten or twenty, walking back across the passes in the Zagros range.

But now they are arriving in hundreds in the backs of trucks along with all their earthly belongings, and depositing themselves in the immediate vicinity of our perimeter.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow investigating the Turkic-speaking Republics of the (former) Soviet Union

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And as soon as a new group hits, make-shift shelters start springing up like so many mushrooms: tents made of lice-infested blankets, plastic sheets and bits of parachute, ringed by fire-blackened pots and pans and rusted, razor-edged cheese tins now used for washing and porting water.

It is ugly, a blight on the otherwise pristine landscape in which we are found--a wide meadow sewn in winter wheat, now undulating green.

But the meadow is now become a toilet, the odor of al fresco excrement adding a redolent edge to acrid smell of tire and green-grass fires and the general pungency of the people within the tents, none of whom have been able to wash in weeks.

We have learned how to cope with such arrivals during the day: we knock down the squalid structures almost as soon as they are slapped up, and, with the help of coalition soldiers and locally hired wardens, force the kurds to line for registration, inoculation and the distribution of rations: clean blankets, macaroni, tea and sugar and plastic shower shoes.

The final stage in the process is the assignment of the kurds to their temporary abodes -blue and white, family-sized Sears-Robuck tents smelling like they are right out of the box.

The tent suburbs are organized along traditional kurdish clan lines and then further broken down into something the military calls UZANs--an acronym I have yet to fathom or have explained to me. Each ozan has its own portable water supply ('water buffalo') and even its own communal toilet, with the number of the ozan painted on the 'stink-stack' for easy identification:

A-Triangle-9; D Square-13; E-Circle-6.

The stink stacks are a nice touch, as they effectively remove the usual odors of the cess-pool into the atmosphere; another award-winning element of design is the fact that the toilets have been aligned so that they don't face Mecca.

It is an impressive set up and would seem to disprove the old oxymoron about 'military efficiency.'

Indeed, from a distance and during daylight hours, the camp might almost appear to be a rather over-popular Recreational Vehicle site in a Yellowstone Park meadow:

Yes, Mister Ahmed, you are booked into the oblong-seven-c; please pack out what you pack in, and don't feed the animals...

One almost expects a herd of bison over the next knoll.

But this is not Yellowstone Park.

It is a refugee camp in war-wasted Iraq and busting at the seams.

The only similarity we share with the administrators of the national park system is that we don't like surprise arrivals--like a bus load of pregnant women showing up without bookings in the middle of the night.

That is when the system breaks down, as it is doing right now.

But somebody has to do something and that somebody looks like us.

'We' are some two dozen volunteers associated with the New

York-based International Rescue Committee and its 'joint-venture' partner in relief, the Portland, Oregon based NorthWest Medical Teams. We have taken on the task of managing Camp Red Eye until someone--specifically, the United Nations' High Commission for Refugees--deigns to get involved in a more immediate way. At present, they are still 'assessing' the situation from their base in the Turkish city of Diyarbakir and occasionally loading buses with refugees and sending them helter-skelter over the frontier.

"Goddamn UNHCR!" growls Stu Wilcox of NorthWest as someone points a flashlight in his blurry eyes, "They were supposed to send those people tomorrow!"

"Forty women?" asks his tent mate, Dr Ben Josefson, an elderly, very Jewish pediatrician from New Jersey who has come out of retirement to join the IRC, "All in delivery?"

"They didn't say," says Linda, a nurse from Minneapolis who is acting as the IRC medical coordinator, "but we better start boiling water for them all."

"Pump's down," says Scott, the sewage and water man from Seattle, "The generator was 110 but the motor was 220."

"Oh my God!" wails baby-face Mark, one of the few 'professional' aid workers in the camp, "What will we do?"

"Shut up, fatso," growls Lois, a tough-nosed nurse from Washington who has postponed her marriage to participate in her fourth IRC mission.

"Hold on everyone."

It is IRC point man Mark Gorman, cutting off the other Mark's hysteria and taking control of the situation.

The erstwhile director of the huge IRC operation on the Thailand/Cambodia frontier, in better times Gorman runs a public health center on an Indian reservation in Alaska, but has heeded the IRC call to arms once more and came to Kurdistan to slap diverse personalities into shape.

"Mark," Gorman orders, "take the landrover to the border and try and hold back the other buses for as long as you can. We can deal with the forty virgins, but not their husbands and kids."

"Why is it always me?" moans the professional.

"Because that's why you are here."

"Lois," Gorman continues, "Get Colonel Umart on the radio and tell him we need some water from the mess, pronto."

"Check."

"We'll need a shelter; Rich, tell the Global Partner's people we'll need their place as a nursery; Linda, what do we have in the way of sutures in case there's a caesarian?"

"We'll have to make do with what we've got."

"How about a translator?"

All eyes turn to me.

I am new with the IRC, brand new, in fact:

I walked into the camp some hours before and said I was a multi-lingual journalist who felt that my skills might be better used in assisting the relief program than writing about it.

I was not a doctor or nurse.

I was not a sanitation specialist or even a logistician.

I was nothing that anyone had dealt with before, and thus almost suspect.

But Gorman had felt it might be useful to have me hanging around, and now it appeared that my talents might be put to use.

But there was one problem: I still didn't speak Kurdish.

"My kurdish is still pretty weak," I lie, "but I can handle it in Arabic or Turkish."

"How's your baby speak?" jokes Dr Ben, "I've been studying all my life but still can't speak a word."

"Radio says the bus has crossed the bridge," says Lois, ear to the crackling box, changing the subject.

"Let's go," says Gorman.

Suddenly acting like the cohesive team we know we are not, we hustle off to our assigned tasks: the landrover takes off for the Khabur bridge while Lois goes to raise the water from the mess hall; others are already busy creating a maternity ward for forty in the field; the rest of us grab our flashlights and start stumbling through the dark over the tent stakes and cables toward the entrance of the camp. There we await the arrival of the bus, or buses, hoping to stop the caravan before it deposits its human cargo helter-skelter in and among the administration tents.

It may be Spring and we may be in Iraq, but the kurdish highlands are cold and very few of the volunteers came prepared for the weather. Snow still dusts the tops of the Zagros range.

"Hell of a time for a house-call," says Dr Ben, stomping his feet.

"Reminds me of that time in Mexico after the quake," says Scott, remembering a relief project some years ago.

"Bangladesh after the monsoon," chirps in another veteran.

"Sudan during that khamseen," adds a third.

"What's that?" asks Dr Ben, but before he can get an answer, two headlights pierce the night.

Our forty prospective mothers are about to arrive.

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In fact, we performed only one delivery that night although the report that the bus was filled with pregnant women may have been entirely accurate: Kurdish ladies always seemed to be at some stage of pregnancy, and there were forty of them aboard.

Creating a human stretcher by locking arms, we managed to get the lady in labor off the bus and into the make-shift delivery ward in time to give birth to a bouncing baby boy.

I forget whether the child was named that night and if so what he was called.

George, as in Bush, was a popular appellation among the infant population of the period, and it is likely that he was so named.

But I am not sure whether baby George survived.

Infant mortality was high--even when delivery was effected with the help of volunteer doctors and nurses. Sadly, many of the

mothers, after leaving our clean maternity wards, would wrap their infants in flea-infested old blankets, unable to understand why their babies died of typhoid fever after a few days.

There were other causes of early death as well--malnourishment, disintery, pneumonia and even several rumored, but unproven, cases of cholera.

The kurdish kids might have died at a similar rate even in times of peace. There seemed to be almost an indifference to a child's prospects for survival, maybe because both mother and father knew there would soon be another.

In a sense, this underlined in the most personal way the differences between the Kurds and the western relief workers drawn to Turkey and Iraq to help them in their moment of need:

The kurds continued to procreate, even when living forty to a tent, whereas the sexual life of most of the volunteers was reduced to zero.

We were an odd lot the soldiers and civilians involved in the Great Kurdish Relief Effort, 1991.

First there were the allied soldiers, removed from NATO bases guarding against a Soviet invasion of Europe to the Turco-Iraqi frontier to baby-sit a bunch of refugees from a war the allies had supposedly just won.

There were British special forces in the hills around Zakho and manning a forward air base outside Sersenk near the Iraqi lines, while the French were de-mining the mountains through which the kurds had fled.

There were the trigger-happy Spaniards, staring out from sand-bag check-points on the major roads, and happy-go-lucky Italians, hustling Suriyani Christian girls.

The Dutch, sporting punk hair-styles and earrings, were on the rehabilitating and operating another surgical ward in down-town Zakho that had been gutted by the staff of Arab doctors and nurses before they left town.

Mainly, though, it was the Americans who made the camp and who were the true heros of the hour:

After years of abuse in Europe as symbols of unrepentant aggression in the world, they now found themselves idolized by the kurds as living icons embodying the concept of freedom.

They were former car-thieves from South Chicago who now ran high tech weapons; corn-fed, buxom blondes from Wisconsin who now worked as stiff-lipped MPs; long-drawl Texas cracker-grunts who had been raised to believe that everyone in the Middle East is a rag-head terrorist. Now they were drowning in the love of Muslims who believed that George Bush was the most recent Prophet.

And the kurds had good reason for believing so.

Within hours of the announcement of Operation Homeward Bound (or some such; it was the fourth part of the series that started with Operation Desert Shield before moving into Operation Desert Storm and then, when the Kurds turned out to be bigger losers than Saddam Hussein, Operation Provide Comfort; the sequence ended with Operation Poised Hammer), squads of grunts in

kevlar flack jackets riding aboard HumVee all-terrain vehicles drove across the Khabur bridge on the Turco-Iraqi frontier to deliver a simple message to Saddam's Republican Guards:

Get out, because the Kurds are coming back in.

The Iraqis complied, having rather lost their taste for the sort of Nintendo war the Americans liked to play.

Immediately, the allies began setting up their command posts, mess halls, computer centers, carpenter workshops, motor pools and exercise arenas--all air-dropped into the Safe Haven zone by Chinook helicopters operating out of the massive supply base in the Turkish border town of Silopi.

And as the combat troops pushed the cease-fire line ever deeper into northern Iraq, the rear-guard was taken over by reserves.

Pulled out of every imaginable profession stateside, they were doctors, lawyers, policemen, research scientists, self-employed businessmen and corporation brass. One captain I met made toilet seats; appropriately, if coincidentally, he was detailed to head the latrine-creation company, and had some very specific ideas about design.

Many of the reserves had now been playing at war for nine months, and they wanted to go home--now.

Called up to their state-side units in the Fall, they had served in the rear lines in Saudi, then in the mop-up operation in Kuwait and were now obliged to run a refugee camp until they could turn it over to someone else:

And that meant us.

The military knew us as PVAs, or Private Volunteer Agencies, but the internationally accepted acronym was NGOs, standing for Non-Government Organizations.

Like the soldiers, the NGOs came in different shapes and sizes and had different briefs.

First there were the large, professional organizations like CARE and the Red Cross that worked so closely with their native governments that it was often difficult to regard them as NGOs per se, and getting these organizations into the field was often a cumbersome task due to their bureaucratic nature.

Next came the quasi-international NGOs, like Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF) with its different national chapters, the rival Medicines du Monde, Save the Children, OxFam and Action Internationale Contra l'Famine. The MSF is perhaps the best known and the most active due to the no-strings-attached support it enjoys from the European Community--even to the extent of supplying helicopters. As a result, the MSF is able to intervene directly in crisis areas even if that means treading on a few political toes.

Then there were the traditional NGOs--a large amorphous category of do-gooders who draw their funds from private subscription as well as occasional public donation. The group includes everyone from well-established organizations like the IRC and Catholic Relief Services to newer groups that tend to mix

religion with their mission: Global Partners, World Vision and, to a certain extent, the IRC team-player in Iraq, NorthWest Medical Teams.

Finally, there were the free-lance philanthropists/adventurers who simply dropped in on the disaster zone to operate on their own or, like me, to hook up with existing organizations.

In my instance it was almost a family affair:

Within a week of my arrival, I convinced my wife and father, both doctors, to work with the IRC in Iraq after the MSF camp where they were working in Turkey folded.

Joining them in the IRC medical team was another wandering do-gooder, a Scottish nurse named Alma who had accompanied a load of used clothes from Glasgow, and just didn't feel like going home yet. A similar set of circumstances brought Astride, a French horse-trainer to Camp Red Eye: she had volunteered to drive a ten-wheel mobile surgery ward from Lyons to Kurdistan and stayed to see what else she could do.

Others included two Buddhist monks (one from Vienna and one from Singapore), who, dressed in their orange robes, appointed themselves the task of making rounds of the tent cities to look for malnourished and neglected children (they found and saved many). Three Australian former soldiers on their way from Down-under to London also just popped in, and ended up running the camp sanitation system.

Then there was Fritz, an elderly gentleman from Zurich, who decided that the best thing he could do for the Kurds was to build a model Swiss Chalet in the middle of Camp Red Eye. Bringing all the timber and bolts needed with him on a flat bed truck, he started building -only to discover that the Kurds thought the beams were better suited for fuel, and piece by piece Fritz's dream chalet began to disappear into evening fires.

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The coalition forces were in Zakho because they had been able to tell the Iraqi government to get out, and backed that up by the threat of armed force.

But the status of the Camp Red Eye NGOs (and certainly the free-lance relief workers) was a little different:

We were civilians who had, in effect, violated the frontiers of a sovereign state. In principle, we were subject to the laws pertaining to illegal entry: trial and, if convicted on the usual espionage charges, death by hanging.

Obviously, the presence of the allied military lessened these concerns. The government of Iraq, we were fairly confident, was unlikely to pick up a relief worker illegally wandering around the countryside and risk retaliation by the legions of battle-hungry soldiers who felt they had been gypped out of the glory of Bush's January and February war.

But the matter of whether the 'host government' of Iraq had invited anybody to assist the Kurds did give others pause:

Most NGOs, in fact, remained twiddling their thumbs in Turkey, dithering away their time in the city of Diyarbakir at endless committee meetings. The usual subject was the most recent 'outrage' perpetrated by the government of Turkey to prevent relief supplies from reaching the needy Kurds. I had attended many of these meetings, in an effort to convince such groups as the Catholic Relief Society and World Vision that a delay in delivery of World Health Organization vaccines probably was the result of a truck driver stopping off to see his mistress in a road-side town rather than a nefarious plot in Ankara to steal medicines, but to no avail:

The NGOs in Turkey arrived with an attitude: Turkey was the true culprit in the kurdish crisis, and nothing I could say would dissuade them from this view.

The more curious, then, that it was precisely those organizations that declined assisting the military-based relief effort in Zakho, even while the great refugee wave was receding before their very eyes.

Sadly, the ditherers included the United Nations' High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the international agency allegedly responsible for coordinating relief efforts to both man-made and natural disasters across the globe.

This little book is not designed as a polemic against the UNHCR, but we who were there in the early, filthy, chaotic days of the camp had a bitter laugh when the Blue Flag of the UN was finally raised over Red Eye, an event announced to the world via the BBC in terms like "Twelve members of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees on Tuesday took over control of the kurdish Refugee camp outside the town of Zakho..."

The UN folks--three staffers, if I remember correctly, but maybe a dozen if one includes their drivers, cooks and maids--had shown up that very day, set up a tent with their insignia on it and then declared the camp to be theirs with scarcely a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am to the folks who had built it: us.

We were the vanguard, the boys (and girls) on the front, digging latrines, delivering babies and doling out rations to adult human beings who were, finally, capable of doing all those jobs themselves.

But more than that, we had assumed the more obscure function of providing 'presence'--acting as living reassurances that the world cared about the kurds. And following the planned allied withdrawal from the area, we knew we would be the first to face Saddam's wrath.

We had in effect volunteered to be human shields--an irony, I hope, not lost on the man who created the concept.

This is our story, or at least mine: the confessions of a rogue relief worker in deepest darkest kurdistan.

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Outline follows, good-bye for now

Baku, Azerbaijan 31.12.91

Rough Outline of Rogue Relief Worker: Kurdistan

Chapter One: Midnight Midwifing in Camp Red Eye

The news comes crackling over the portable phone that a bus load of pregnant kurdish women has just crossed the border and our headed our way- the newly established Displaced Iraqi Persons Camp outside Zakho in Northern Iraq. The camp, set up by the American military and its Gulf War allies is designed to convince the half million Kurdish refugees in Turkey that they can come home. It is an admirable system, but not one designed for surprises--but that is what there are everyday.

*Description of camps set up by US and allies in wheatfield
*Description of vanguard organization in Camp Red Eye
*Description of military; Criticism of UNHCR

Chapter Two: The Baghdad Hotel (TCG-X

The camp grows; more NGOs come--and with them, demands on the military structure we are so dependent on. The word is passed down that we will have to fend for ourselves. My task: find a house to live in, and spoons and forks and beds for 40...

subchapters: Procurement of Water/Silopi and Supplies/Staff

Chapter Three: Zakho--Our Home away from Home

Description of Zakho town and environs: Peshmergahs; police building; Abbasid Bridge; Christian quarter; neighbors and folks dropping in on the hotel; the IRC/North West Medical Team profiles; military types; Captain Dave

Chapter Four: The General--Kek Aziz Aqrawi (TCG-XX)

Old general shows up for a shower and becomes my companion and guide and friend

subchapter: two poets

Chapter Five: Wanderings in Liberated Kurdistan

With hotel running itself, I have time to pursue my real interests--getting under the skin of kurdistan at this peculiar moment in its history. At first my out of lime travels are only day trips in the immediate environs--with Stu and the General, we discover a weapons dump down a dirt road; again with Stu, I take a trip East to Kanimasi and the Zab; later to a Monastery on Tigris with IRC's Rich, Jeanie and Gail; another jaunt to a Waterfall in Zagros mountains with Rich, Bernie and Alma, where our hot-wire car lacks the guts to get back up what it had gone down, forcing us to walk six miles in the gathering dusk to the camp of a number of horny French soldiers.

Chapter Six: Behind the Lines: Dohuk

But my main travels happened with the General, and were focused on the dicey area around Dohuk, the main city of the northwest and lynch-pin for traffic movements which had curiously been left out of allied control. After a near resumption of hostilities (include some live-fire between British Special Forces and Saddam's troops defending several palaces), the blockade on the road in was finally lifted, although the city remained under Iraqi control. But the ambivalent situation leaves a window of opportunity and the general and I slip through

* Description of road south; marine outpost; Iraqi guards
* Description of war-racked Dohuk and those who stayed behind
  --Riots in the streets; NGO terror; UNHCR policemen panic
  --Set up house, but IRC/NWM cancel--first friction

Extras: Mosul Dam and Yezidi Shrines/the Sharafhani/Silwan

Chapter Seven: Out of Sector Wanderings (based on TCG-XXX)

The taste of kurdistan beyond the control of the Allies was too tempting to resist, and so I began pushing into areas controlled by the Peshmergahs, and then into areas under direct Iraqi government control, where the posters of Saddam Hussein still loomed large and where wandering American relief workers were regarded as something less than saviors and liberators.

---Amadiyah and Pesh meeting; invitation to Qasr Surchi
---Zab river valley; Saddam's Palaces vs Barzan
---Shaqlawa/Kala Dizia/Iranian frontier
--Bekhme/Dizistan
--Meeting with Barzani

Chapter Eight: Success Breeds Over-contentment

NGOs, including IRC, do not like my loose canon attitude: too dangerous, they think; Reign him in. True, I was part of an organization and there are limits to individual choice, but it rankles: the new crew is spoiled, and incredibly jittery--to the point where the NWM people all baited out of Dohuk in fear one day, leaving my father behind.

And the kurds are going 'home', but not to the homes they fled at the end of the Gulf War; rather to the homes they were forced to leave in 1975: and none of the NGOs or UNHCR want to have anything to do with that fact: they are dealing with Baghdad...

Nowhere was this clearer than in the rich Silwani plain

*The politics of harvest/Arab settlers vs kurdish claimers

Chapter Eight: Camp Red Eye Dying

The US Military is starting its long awaited Pull Out; we change houses for 'security'. My role diminishing save as 'wild card' in the pack: the man to contact about doing things like dealing with the Peshmergah leadership and even running things over the lines that the UNHCR couldn't or wouldn't want to know about. This is not guns or anything sinister but material from the huge warehouse of aid in Zakho: Baghdad is either seizing the shipments or, in collusion with its 'partners' in the UNHCR, diverting it where it wants.

Then I am assigned a new task to tie me down--The Farm.

The lush, green wheat field had turned yellow, the wheat ripe but without an owner, and had become a real fire hazard. Already a couple of blazes had broken out. My task was to plow it under. The idea is insane -thousands of people living off the dole, unable to harvest the rolling wheat field they are living in.

*The Harvest; Tommy Tolstoy and his Peasants Brigade.
*Riding tractor with the General Aziz--the last I see him.
*Scout and Souki's wedding with me as Mullah-priest

Chapter Nine: Time to Move On

There remained one last area to explore: the third sector, still controlled by Iraq. With fudged Iraq passes issued I decide it is time to go down the road to see how far I can get. None of the drivers will go, but happily, there was a man from the AP lurking around the hotel with a sense of adventure--and, more specifically, with a Suzuiki jeep that greatly resembled the fleet of cars donated by someone to the useless UNHCR staff. We head for Mosul, and bluff our way through the lines.

*Description of Mosul
*Description of Arbil; flares in the night; tank blasts; hotel in Arbil; electricity only during the day
*Cross lines to Dasr Surchi; blown out equipment along road;
*Bounce back across lines to Acre; nasty soldiers every mile

Chapter ten: Last Stop: Lalesh and the Yezidis (TCG-XXX)

Description of 'Devil Worshippers' as symbol of kurds

Aftermath: Out of Kurdistan

Diyarbakir swimming pool with NGOs lounging around. TV teams having packed and gone until next great kurdish revolt and exodus. Local kurds, newly free to speak and write kurdish clearly the leaders of any future kurdish movement; Iraqi kurds look like hopelessly romantic rustics in comparison.

In addition to the allied combat soldiers who maintain general order (including the prevention of mob-justice toward suspected collaborators and spies), we have hired on 15 year-old Peshmergah wardens to prevent the kurdish men from jumping line on their women. Keeping the myriad children out from under the wheels of jeeps and HumVees is also a task in itself: kurdish kids seem to wait until a vehicle is upon them before running across a road, as if daring the driver to brake or veer.

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