

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Letter from Baghdad: Tony Kahn reads a letter from a medic in Baghdad, Iraq, named Charles Elias. He writes of the daily slog of his life in wartime; the conditions, his responsibilities.

Tony Kahn:

I'm Tony Kahn, the Producer and the Director of *Morning Stories*. Usually on *Morning Stories*, people come to our studios to tell their tales. Today though, our story comes via email from a friend of mine, and my wife's, in Baghdad. His name is Charles Elias. Call it *A Day in the Life of a Medic for the Marines*.

Dear Harriet and Tony,

It's O-400 Wednesday morning and we're heading some fifteen miles south of our forward operating base to hunt down insurgents and detain them. Our destination is an abandoned potato factory, which is not yet secured. My job is to provide medical support for the troops and physical exams for the detainees. The operation is called Mayhem Harvest. The vehicle we're in is a piece of – well, you know the word. First a flat tire, then minutes after we leave the base, we pull over into the soft shoulder with a broken transmission. The driver gets panicky. We're vehicle number six in a convoy of eighteen. Not the most desirable place to be stopped. The convoy quickly staggers into a tactical formation to block traffic from both directions. Soon after, we're in tow by another hummer, our eyes peeled for suspicious activity and roadside IEDs (improvised explosive devices).

We arrive at the potato factory as the sun emerges from the horizon. The area is hot, dusty, and dingy with bird feathers and droppings all over the place. We establish our area in a hardened structure housing two huge electrical transformers that look like they might provide electricity to the whole town. We scrounge a desk and an old, ripped-up couch from an abandoned office nearby. As soon as we get organized, we're presented with our first detainee: a middle-aged, Iraqi man with little English suspected of laying a detonation cord. He's blindfolded and handcuffed and placed in the dirt for later questioning. He iterates broken syllables, "Mister, Mister, friend. No Saddam. Bush."

As the hours passed he became more demanding, wanting to drink, eat and smoke. He was given bread and water. At about three hours he started babbling, "Mister, Mister. W.C.." Being from England I understood that "W.C." meant that he had to use the toilet. We led him out to the tall grass. "No, No," he said in Arabic. We led him to a more appropriate spot where he did his stuff, using his left hand to clean himself.

Some hours later the next five detainees appeared. They looked sneaky and apparently had been arrested for possessing AK47s, unauthorized firearms, and hoods. Traces of

gunpowder were found on their clothes. They were mostly cooperative. One of them blubbering in the background, apparently with good reason: his brother had been killed in the crossfire the day before. There were three of us in all: myself, a sergeant, and a lance corporal. The HET, Human Exploitation Team, arrived to question the prisoners and to transfer them to a secure facility. As nightfall hit, we tried to take turns sleeping. The temperature was unbearable and the sandflies busy at work. The electricity intermittently cut out for extended periods of time. I arose at midnight to man the entrance to the building with an M16 rifle and 9mm pistol in hand.

The night was still, and quiet. Rumor has it that we're moving to another base in January, but who knows how much truth there is in that? There's some dangerous assignments out here, but of course everything has that potential. Morning was upon us and we were awoken to the sound of prayer over loudspeakers in the neighboring community. Another typical day here in Iraq.

I'm doing OK and time seems to slip away pretty quickly. I'm basically doing what I need to do, and nothing more. I'm glad to hear you are well. Send my regards to your son. I'm overwhelmed with your support. Thank you so much. Make sure you write. I'd love to hear from you soon.

Best wishes,
Charles.

Charles Elias was born in England forty-two years ago. When he came to the States, he joined the National Guard. He'd just started a new business, helping kids in trouble and families torn apart by addiction when he got called to Baghdad. He had two months left in his contract with the Marines at the time. He was reassigned for seven. If all goes well, Charles will come back home in May.

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