



# *Night Runners of Baghdad:* *A Look Back at Ironside Military Police on Route Irish*

*By Dr. Russell W. Glenn*

*The rules were different in early 2004. Very different. But then, so was the threat. Humvees, sport utility vehicles, and other military transports individually traveled Route Irish—that stretch of urban highway between Baghdad International Airport and the “Green Zone” where the main headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority was located. Passengers were comfortably seated, armed with perhaps no more than a sidearm. The influence of improvised explosive devices had yet to be fully asserted. Still, travel in Baghdad was serious business.*

*This article describes only a few minutes, one ride along Route Irish. My colleague and I had just interviewed 1st Armored Division personnel in an effort to gather their hard-learned lessons so that they could be passed on to others who would soon deploy. We are passengers, mere observers this evening. This tale is not about us, but rather six superb U.S. military police Soldiers who would travel Route Irish countless times during their tour of duty in Iraq.*

Four Soldiers stand at the bottom of the stairs as we descend from the second floor of the division headquarters. They are familiar to us. We met them earlier that same sun-washed afternoon when they brought us here. That trip was uneventful, unnotable—the conversation casual despite the constant vigilance of the drivers and commanders in both vehicles. The discussion evolved into banter and the topic of a long tour of duty—one that had recently been unexpectedly extended. Their morale was good, their attitude that of polished professionals, despite the unpleasant surprise. The driver of the lead vehicle, a specialist, had been married only a couple of months before deploying and had just reenlisted a few weeks before our trip, ensuring that he will be away from his hometown for at least several more years—except for the occasional well-earned leave. The commander, a sergeant, is also married. Military life is nothing new to him. He is a military “brat,” the offspring of a parent in the armed services. Articulate and disciplined, he serves in a position normally assigned to a staff sergeant. The driver of the second vehicle is also a specialist. He is 26. He and his

wife have two children and are expecting a third. A 24-year-old second lieutenant leads these Soldiers. He, too, is newly married, having “tied the knot” during Officer Basic Course following college graduation.

That was this afternoon. Their duties are the same for the dark journey this evening. But tonight, the banter is placed aside; the conversation becomes formal. The lieutenant addresses my colleague and me, along with our escort officer, “Sir, I need to brief you before we mount up. We’re about to leave the wire. I want everyone to remember that we are in a war zone. Our job is to protect you as we move to your destination. Your first level of protection is the Kevlar and protective vest that you are each wearing.”

The lieutenant makes eye contact with his three subordinates and our escort officer, who is the only one carrying a weapon. He continues, “At this time, we will go into ‘red’ status with our weapons, meaning everyone who is armed will load a magazine and chamber a round. We will be traveling at close interval and high speed. Lock your doors. Windows are to stay up . . .”

And the briefing continues. The lieutenant describes the actions to be taken if we are fired upon, what happens if a vehicle becomes disabled, and how to handle other contingencies that might arise. He concludes with the inevitable termination, “Are there any questions?”

We have none. The message and intent are clear. A nod from the lieutenant and we move into the night that all but overwhelms the artificial light over the door. The humvees sit by the curb. Tonight, each of them has an additional crewmember—a gunner.

The lieutenant directs us to our seats. We buckle up as he moves to his seat in the trail vehicle. The door slams with a solid thud. I reach up to shake hands with and introduce myself to the gunner. His hand reaches down from above. In spite of the fact that I cannot see a face beyond the vehicle roof, we strike up a conversation. The gunner, a 21-year-old specialist, says he is looking forward to getting back to hunting and fishing in his hometown. The final preparations for departure curtail our brief exchange.

It is a pleasant night—cool, clear. The addition of another man only slightly adds to the cramped interior of the humvee. The gunner pivots to the right and left, confirming his freedom of movement. His actions are a gentle reminder for us to keep our gear away from his feet.

The lead vehicle pulls away in response to a nod from the vehicle commander. The one to the rear falls in line. After a short drive to the gate, we are outside the headquarters area but still amid the protection provided by barbed wire, obstacles, and guard positions.

The vehicle commander and I renew our conversation from that afternoon, with the driver and my colleague occasionally interjecting. Between us, presumably deaf to our ramblings given the loud rumble of the engine and the air whipping about his upper torso, the gunner moves his weapon from side to side less casually now. He is already monitoring the road ahead and the ground to each side, like an athlete warming up before a big game. He scans a cluster of trees on the left, then pans toward a small, slightly more distant building on the right—searching for anyplace that might conceal an enemy ready to ambush. His rhythm is serious, purposeful, and completely controlled. Below, our discussion turns to the Soldiers’ plans for the future when the 1st Armored Division returns to its home base in Germany. Time with family and follow-on assignments are much anticipated.

The road ahead, which leads away from the compound, turns black—its pale, dust surface becoming asphalt. The humvee bumps onto the pavement, and the driver steers left onto the wide band of highway linking the airport with downtown Baghdad.

The change is immediately obvious. Our vehicle commander returns his attention to the front. The conversation ceases. Heartbeats quicken. The engine roars as the speed of the humvee increases, the hum of tires on the pavement

giving way to a high-pitched whine. We rip past trees, overpasses, light poles, and civilian vehicles—those close enough disappear with a burst of sound that recoils off our vehicle armor. The driver deftly maneuvers across lanes in the nocturnal traffic. The speed of the humvee means that potential ambush sites approach at manic speed. Our gunner’s turret movements become frenetic. Soldier and weapon sweep to either side. A truck snaps by, and the gunner spins to monitor rearward—or so I assume by his posture. I still cannot see his eyes. His alertness is meant to intimidate anyone with malevolent intentions. The serious end of the weapon, unthreatening to the innocent, is only a twist of his wrist away from focusing on a deserving target.

Cars appear and vanish, flying past too quickly for passengers’ faces to register. Now and then, others slip away more slowly—their speed greater. Drivers and passengers suddenly turn toward us, initial expressions of shock at being passed surrendering to curious stares. The world becomes a series of snapshots instead of video. A pedestrian flicks by. A palm frond lays curled by the roadside. A cyclist is frozen on the bridge above. The road ahead brightens.

The driver lets up on the accelerator. Our engine is suddenly less anxious, now freed of its heavy burden. The electricity within the cab fades, slipping away with the speed. Out in front, the road becomes even brighter. The Green Zone gateway looms ahead. Guard shacks, poised combat vehicles, and alert Soldiers grow in the windshield. The gunner’s feverish motions calm. Conversations resume. A Soldier waves us through. A few hundred yards past the gate, our convoy of two halts to allow its passengers to dismount. We shake hands with the Soldiers and extend our thanks to them for this day of service and their many others.

The six night runners pull away from the curb to run the gauntlet yet again. They are but a half dozen of the thousands that have served and continue to serve. Most journeys end as ours did—uneventful. Others do not—the consequences ranging from a brush with death to passage through its gates. And still they drive on in Baghdad, Mosul, Kabul, and an infinity of elsewhere—engines laboring, eyes straining, tensions tight. They are Soldiers striving to bring those eventual nights when the streets are safe for all.

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