

# AMBUSH AND AFTERMATH

## Contractors and Bureaucracy on the Interagency Battlefield

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Christopher, U.S. Army, Retired, Ph.D.

**W**HEN CONFRONTING BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES, common sense should override formal procedures that are in place to serve military missions. Standard procedures are not ends-in-themselves and cannot account for everything. When they get in the way of effective operations, they become liabilities. Soldiers and leaders can foster more synergy and effectiveness by knowing when to override procedure. The people and the mission have to be fundamental in such decisions.

The following narrative describes the aftermath of an ambush on a private logistics convoy supporting the Iraqi Army in August 2004. As a private military contractor, my company was responsible for the security of the convoy. What occurred demonstrates some of the challenges that contractors encounter on the interagency battlefield. This discussion is not an indictment of anyone—it is a description of events from which we can extract lessons. I believe such lessons may help both private military contractors and those in the military who work with them on the common battlefield.

The ambush occurred about 2:00 p.m. on a hot August afternoon. I found out about it at around 5:00 p.m. via cell phone from a colleague who received an email from his friend at a military base in Mosul, about 600 kilometers (400 miles) north of Baghdad. His friend had heard about the attack from some U.S. military personnel stationed there.

My company had 12 American security guards and four Iraqi drivers performing escort for a convoy of 10 flatbeds, driven by Iraqis and loaded with refurbished medium trucks bound for the newly reconstituted Iraqi Army training base at Al Kasik. Al Kasik was the first training base reopened for the newly reconstituted Iraqi military, and there was intense pressure to get it operational as soon as possible. Since my company teamed with an Iraqi company to provide the perimeter security for this base, I knew the desolate nature and danger of the area. The challenge of trying to cobble together the details of an ambush that allegedly occurred somewhere along a 500-kilometer stretch of uninhabited desert highway was intensely frustrating.

In the hours following the first notification, the nightmare began to reveal itself piece by piece: an improvised explosive device detonated along the

*LTC Paul Christopher, U.S. Army, retired, lived for two years in Baghdad, Iraq, and is currently a business consultant for an Iraqi-owned company. After graduating from Norwich University in 1972, LTC Christopher served 10 years in Army light infantry units before receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts and becoming the director of the philosophy program at the U.S. Military Academy. He is the author of *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues* and numerous articles on domestic and international humanitarian issues.*

PHOTO: Burnt convoy escort vehicle, August 2004.

(All photos courtesy of the author)

highway, at least one American dead, some wounded, trucks burning on the side of the road, no status on the location of the convoy transport trucks, whereabouts of the Iraqi company's convoy drivers unknown.

Sometime in the early morning, exhausted and frustrated, we received word that the injured had been evacuated and the survivors were near Mosul at a military airbase called Diamondback. My driver (Ahmed), his brother (Hussein), a close Lebanese friend (Johnny Haddad), and I jumped in a sedan and headed north. Our plan was to get to all the survivors as a show of corporate support, recover the killed in action (KIA), and come back to Baghdad the same day.

We had computer-generated road maps, but they did not indicate military bases, none of which are marked with road signs because the locations are classified. Nevertheless, all the locals know exactly where the bases are. However, in Iraq, one doesn't stop and ask locals for directions to an American military base. Finding our destination added several hours to our travel time.

Camp Diamondback is an enormous base located around what was once the Mosul International Airport, and my people were housed in trailers adjacent to the combat support hospital. They soon provided the details of what had occurred. My team leader and the Iraqi driver in the lead vehicle were killed, the driver decapitated by the blast—both Americans

in the back seat sustained serious head injuries and were evacuated to military hospitals—the driver of the first transport vehicle was killed—both vehicles were completely destroyed in an inferno. The remaining nine Iraqi transport drivers had disconnected their cabs from the flatbeds and headed back toward Baghdad when the explosion occurred, or so we thought.

My newly promoted team leader also gave me the incredible news that when the survivors limped into the safety of the base following the ambush, all bloody and bearing the seriously wounded, the commanding general of the base had them restricted to their rooms for the night and ordered a lengthy interrogation of the team leader. The team leader had been told, “No one takes military vehicles through my area of operations without my knowledge.”

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Although I needed to visit the general, the mission to find the bodies of the KIA drivers was of greater urgency, and it was getting late. I debriefed my people, got them organized for the drive back, and was about to send them on their way when three of them refused to go. I checked with the health center to ensure they had a place to stay, reorganized my team members so they could get started, and headed to the morgue to find the two drivers—the trucking company's and mine.

“They weren't brought here,” the captain at the desk told me. “I suggest you check at one of the military bases nearer the ambush.”

“Any suggestions as to where they are or which one I should check with?”

“I have no idea; I have never been outside this base.”

Ahmed, Hussein, Johnny Haddad, and I jumped back into our sedan and headed south toward the ambush sight. There are about a dozen military bases along Highway 1 between Mosul and Baghdad, and I figured that we would head south and



Truck hit by IED during the ambush.

knock at the door of each of them, if we could find them. I would need to notify families, and I wanted to have their bodies with me when I did so.

The first base we came to was a place nicknamed “LSA Florida Keys,” a logistics supply annex (LSA) about five kilometers east of the highway. It wasn’t marked, but Johnny Haddad had been there on a security detail previously, so he knew the turnoff. As soon as we drove inside the gate, Johnny spotted three flatbed trailers with a single military truck loaded on each located inside a fenced cantonment area. Here were three of the Iraqi company’s delivery trucks with the cabs attached, so not all had dropped their cargo and returned to Baghdad.

It was getting dark and we had to find a nest for the night. Unfortunately, there were no transient facilities on LSA Florida Keys, so we turned back north to Mosul and Diamondback to find a place to sleep. At night, the highways in Iraq belong to the crazies, so it is prudent for sane people of all nationalities to find a safe place after dark. We would have to return to the Keys in the morning.

We got back to Diamondback about 10:00 p.m. and we soon discovered that finding a cot to sleep on at this base would not be easy, especially for the two Iraqis with me. About midnight, I finally cajoled a young Air Force Airman from Tennessee who was on duty to let us have the last two bare bunk beds in a 12-person, windowless trailer by the flight line. We tried to sleep—two to a bunk—in our clothes without pillows, sheets, or blankets, and with the constant roar of planes landing and taking off a couple of hundred meters away. To make it worse, this was indeed a flight line transient cabin, and the other eight occupants went in and out all night long and had to turn on the single overhead light each time, but at least it was safe.

The next morning we zipped the 100-plus kilometers back along the highway to LSA Florida Keys to recover our trucks and drivers. When we arrived, the three drivers were there checking on their trucks. They provided more bad news. Yes, after the explosion, the drivers of the six other transport trucks had dropped their trailers and headed back to Baghdad. Additionally, the truck that was in the ambush, the one in which the inferno engulfed the driver, also had had an assistant driver, who was thrown from the vehicle by the blast. While my security team drove away with their dead and wounded, they were



The author with his Iraqi bodyguard.

unaware that a seriously wounded Iraqi was in the shrubbery on the side of the road. Not all vehicles have assistant drivers, so they had no way of knowing that he was there. My people should have stayed to check on those they were hired to secure, but 12 people securing ten 18-wheelers on a desolate highway in Iraq, without communications, medical evacuation, or even the potential for reinforcements, makes reactive decision making challenging. Their failure to account for the other driver is a lesson my company took to heart.

There was still more bad news. The base commander at LSA Florida Keys had quarantined the Iraqi drivers and vehicles in a fenced lot and forbidden their departure. The Iraqi transport drivers, none of whom could speak English, had no idea why the Americans were holding them under guard in an open parking lot, they only knew that they were on their second day in restriction and had no food, water, or sleeping accommodations. I left my people with the 18-wheelers and their drivers, flagged down a passing military vehicle, and asked the sergeant driving to take me to the base commander.

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My meeting with the base commander started unpleasantly enough, with me asking in somewhat impolite terms if these drivers were under arrest, and if so, by what authority. Furthermore, I explained, their cargo consisted of recently refurbished trucks destined for the Iraqi Army at Al Kasik, that a private Iraqi trucking company secured by my company was taking them there, and that the top U.S. military headquarters in Baghdad initiated and paid for the mission. They were *not* U.S. military vehicles and, therefore, of no concern to him. Fortunately, his demeanor softened as did mine.

The base commander explained that he had no alternatives regarding the drivers, because he was under orders from his higher headquarters to hold them until his commander could ascertain why military vehicles were being transported through his area of operations without his knowledge. But he said he would help me locate the KIA drivers. He directed his operations officer to get me maps and locations of all the military bases, to call each of them, and to find out where the KIA from the ambush had been taken. Then he directed another staff officer to bring food, water, and ice to the drivers while I was waiting for the information. With his help, it seemed as if things were starting to happen.

I then found out from his S-3 that the remains of two drivers were at Forward Support Base (FSB) Speicher, just north of Tikrit, and I was provided with maps, locations, and the names of all the military bases between Mosul and Baghdad. I learned that an Army unit had recovered six flatbeds with their loads intact, which had been taken to FSB Tinderbox, also along Highway 1. The meeting ended on good terms. I had had the good fortune to run into an officer who understood that the people and the mission were fundamental priorities.

When I got back to the holding area, my people had gleaned more information from the Iraqi company's truck drivers. We learned that when they could not see the assistant driver in the burning truck, they searched the area and found him beside the road. He was alive, but they had a hard time getting him into one of their cabs (which are six-plus feet off the ground). He probably died in the process of this effort. They had turned the body over to an Iraqi police checkpoint, so I planned to recover his body as well.

I figured that if the general was concerned about U.S. Army trucks moving through his area, I would

just leave the trucks on his base and let the drivers go home. My focus had to be on recovering the drivers' remains, and I was eager to get back on the road and recover the three drivers. As we sped back onto the highway, we encountered more trouble. A bracket that supports the fan belt on our vehicle broke. We were on the side of a highway between Mosul and Tikrit, it was 140 degrees outside, the battery on my satellite phone was dead, and there was not a service station for 100 kilometers in any direction. This is precisely why I like to travel with my Iraqi drivers: they flagged down a vehicle, disappeared for most of the day, returned with the necessary part, and soon had us up and heading south. However, by then it was getting dark again, and I had no hope of finding FSB Speicher at night, much less finding someone on base to help me, so we returned to Baghdad.

The next morning, I sent one driver with a pickup truck into downtown Baghdad to buy three wooden coffins, while the other driver (Ahmed), Johnny Haddad, and I prepared to head to Camp Speicher. I had not anticipated that the family of the deceased driver that worked for my company would be waiting for me in front of my house.

Mohammed Faick was married with two daughters, ages five and six. His family had come to claim his body so that they could give it a final bath and proper burial. I assured them that I was on my way to find Mohammed, and that I would be back later the same day. The plan was to locate the remains of the three drivers, call Hussein, and tell him to bring the coffins while Johnny and I located some ice on base to pack the remains in for the drive back to Baghdad.

I also called the Iraqi truck transport company for which the other two drivers had worked and told them that I planned to be back in Baghdad with the remains. The three of us jumped back into our old Mercedes and sped north past Tikrit to Camp Speicher, another sprawling base located

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around an airfield. It seemed to take us forever to find the morgue.

The officer at the morgue told me, “Yes, we did receive two very badly burnt corpses from an ambush a few days ago, but we thought they might be Americans, so they have been evacuated to the United States.”

“Only two?” I asked.

“Correct.”

“They weren’t American; they were Iraqis,” I said.

“We couldn’t tell; they were badly burned,” he responded.

“Can I get the bodies returned?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“The families are waiting at my residence in Baghdad for me to bring them today.”

“Well, you certainly won’t get them today,” the officer said with finality.

“Can you give me any idea as to when,” I asked.

“I don’t know if I can even find out where they are. I’ll try. I think they might have been taken to Kuwait.”

We exchanged email addresses, and I started for home to face the families.

The father-in-law of my deceased driver was a sophisticated businessman who could speak some English, but he had brought his own translator anyway.

“When can my daughter get her husband’s body back?” he asked politely.

“I am trying.”

“After 30 years, Americans are still searching for bodies in Vietnam, so you must know how important this is to us.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t believe my husband is dead until I see the body,” his wife said. Both she and the translator were crying.

The next day I headed for what was the headquarters of the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority to ask for help (it is now the Embassy). Everyone seemed concerned and promised speedy resolution.

No one ever contacted me. For several days, I tried to get more information without luck. Either excessive regard for procedures or a lack of concern was slowing the process and getting in the way of a quick resolution for the victim’s families. Weeks passed.

In early September, the owners of my company had flown to Florida to notify the family of the

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deceased American, and they were present at his memorial service and funeral. The injured Americans were taken to a hospital in the United States. (One has since been released, the other had serious brain injuries.) The nine trailers and cargo trucks were waiting for us at FSB Tinderbox and Florida Keys for delivery to Al Kasik.

The whereabouts of the dead Iraqi drivers was still unknown at this time. My best efforts to wade through the U.S. bureaucracy and get them returned to their families quickly had failed. The families and loved ones of my driver, pleading for at least a death certificate, waited every day for me in front of my office for information.

In mid-October, I found out that the deceased Iraqis were possibly at a morgue in Maryland. I was told I would eventually need to provide DNA samples from parents and offspring to the morgue for positive identification before anything could be done and that, if the remains were in fact there, they would be transported back to Baghdad if the samples matched.

In January 2005, DNA samples from the parents and children of the deceased were sent back to the morgue in Maryland so the remains might be identified.

Five months later, in June, the spouse of one of the deceased was still waiting in front of my house. She had been there daily since January to ask me if there was any word on the remains of her husband. I could only tell her that we were trying.

While the whereabouts of the remains was still unresolved, I was involved in a mission to deliver ammunition to a U.S. military base in central Iraq. When we arrived at the base, the guard at the gate would not let us in. We were informed that the base commander had prohibited any non-military vehicles on base. Despite my pleading and showing my U.S. military ID card to several military police at the gate, our three 18-wheelers and four security trucks were halted on the road in the middle of a huge clearing while the gate keepers stayed on the

radio trying to get permission for us to enter and deliver *their ammunition*.

After three hours of sitting in the open, the insurgents had time to organize and set up, and we started taking mortar rounds. I ran to the guards and told them we were sitting ducks with trucks loaded with ammo in the open and that they had to let us onto the base. They immediately locked the gate, raised the “dragon’s teeth” barriers and explained that standing operating procedures were to close everything down whenever they were attacked either by small arms or indirect fire. As I ran back to tell the drivers to turn around and get out of there, the mortar rounds started landing on both sides of our convoy. The bad guys were adjusting fire. We got the trucks turned around and made the six-hour drive back to Baghdad, arriving late at night, never having delivered our ammunition. When I reported to the logistics management control center the next day to brief them about what happened, they just shrugged their shoulders and went back to drinking coffee. No one cared that we came close to being killed because of bureaucratic apathy.

Later, my company decided to bid on a contract to provide security for oil pipeline rehabilitation. The contracting officer (an Air Force captain), stipulated in her request for a proposal that all proposals for a multi-million dollar “Emergency Oil Pipeline Repair” contract be printed on both sides of recycled paper in five separate volumes, and each volume put into a three-ring binder.

My staff spent hours and hours writing our proposal, but despite numerous attempts via email, I could not get her to waive the submission requirements on the two-sided printing, the recycled paper, or the three-ring binders. Using our little portable desktop printer and printing one page at a time, we finally managed to print the 90-page submission

on both sides of some very low quality paper that I was sure would pass for recycled. But we could not find any three-ring binders.

My Iraqi staff informed me that office supplies in Iraq come from Europe, which uses two-ring binders, and that three-ring binders are only found in the United States. We purchased a bunch of two-ring binders, and I sent them to the motor pool with instructions for them to make me some three-ring binders. It did not work, and we could not get three-ring binders from the United States in time.

After this setback, I wrote the contracting officer and explained the situation to her, and asked if she would accept our submission in five volumes on recycled paper, printed on both sides, in two-ring binders. She wrote me back that any proposals submitted that were not in accordance with the specified format would not be reviewed, including the requirement for three-ring binders. The contract was never awarded to anyone. She rotated out of country, and the security job for pipeline repair went to the U.S. military, using troops who probably would have been better deployed elsewhere.

While I was dealing with this, I continued to pursue the return of the bodies of the convoy drivers to their families in Iraq. Fourteen months after the date of the ambush—thanks to the caring and determined intervention of Vickie Wayne, the deputy in the Project and Contracting Office, U.S. Embassy, Baghdad—the remains (small bags of charred unidentifiable material) of the deceased Iraqi drivers were finally returned to their families.

Understanding that standard procedures are not ends in themselves can help to avoid problems, large and small. My company’s experiences are just a sample of the frustrations encountered in wartime. If we do not air these frustrations, there is no chance of minimizing them. The wars in which we now find ourselves are fraught with social complexities that pose challenges with potentially strategic ramifications—and these complexities are all too often avoidable. Avoiding a bureaucratic mind-set that allows us to be lax in our regard for others is something that should command our attention for practical reasons. **MR**

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