

Dispatches from a life in conflict.

**Dateline:** Iraq  
**Local Time:** in Baghdad

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Disclaimer: Kevin Sites is a freelance solo journalist currently on assignment for NBC News in Iraq, but this site is a personal website not affiliated with or funded by NBC News.

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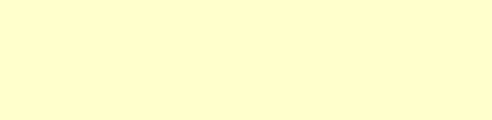
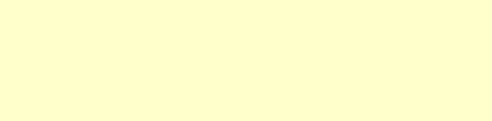
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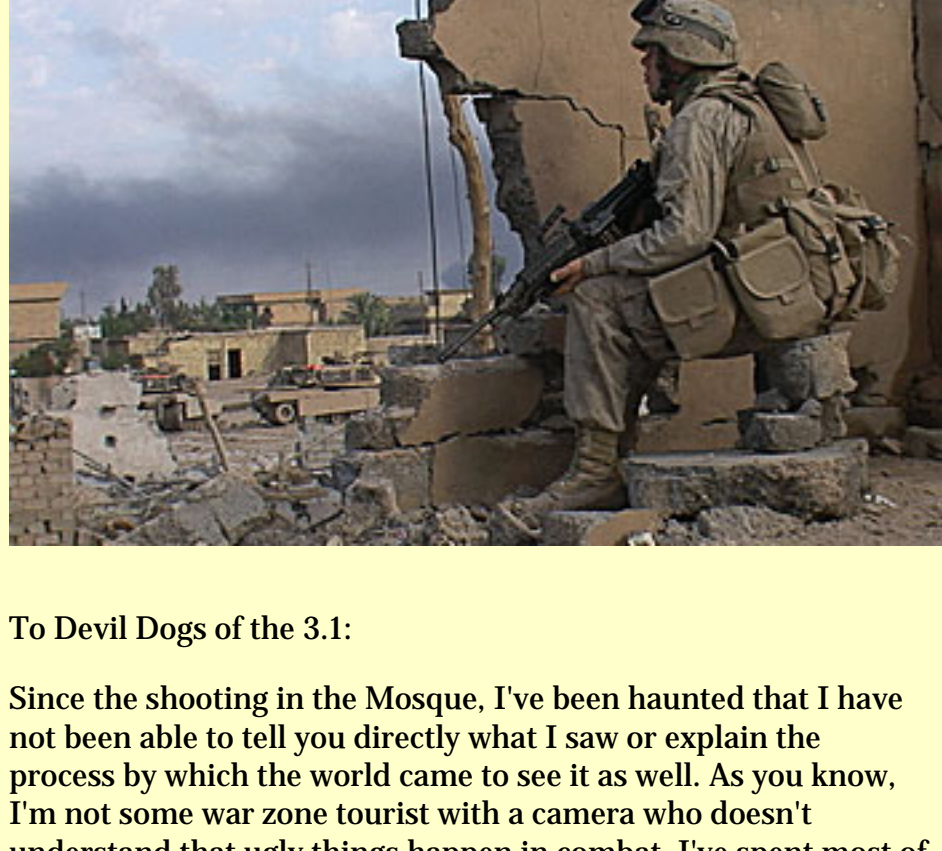
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Sunday, November 21, 2004

## Open Letter to Devil Dogs of the 3.1



To Devil Dogs of the 3.1:

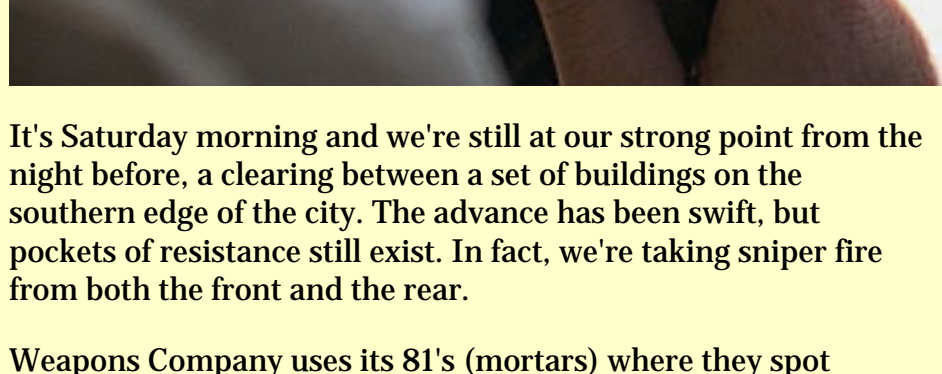
Since the shooting in the Mosque, I've been haunted that I have not been able to tell you directly what I saw or explain the process by which the world came to see it as well. As you know, I'm not some war zone tourist with a camera who doesn't understand that ugly things happen in combat. I've spent most of the last five years covering global conflict. But I have never in my career been a 'gotcha' reporter -- hoping for people to commit wrongdoings so I can catch them at it.

This week I've even been shocked to see myself painted as some kind of anti-war activist. Anyone who has seen my reporting on television or has read the dispatches on this website is fully aware of the lengths I've gone to play it straight down the middle -- not to become a tool of propaganda for the left or the right.

But I find myself a lightning rod for controversy in reporting what I saw occur in front of me, camera rolling.

It's time you to have the facts from me, in my own words, about what I saw -- without imposing on that Marine -- guilt or innocence or anything in between. I want you to read my account and make up your own minds about whether you think what I did was right or wrong. All the other armchair analysts don't mean a damn to me.

Here it goes.



It's Saturday morning and we're still at our strong point from the night before, a clearing between a set of buildings on the southern edge of the city. The advance has been swift, but pockets of resistance still exist. In fact, we're taking sniper fire from both the front and the rear.

Weapons Company uses its 81's (mortars) where they spot muzzle flashes. The tanks do some blasting of their own. By mid-morning, we're told we're moving north again. We'll be back clearing some of the area we passed yesterday. There are also reports that the mosque, where ten insurgents were killed and five wounded on Friday may have been re-occupied overnight.

I decide to leave you guys and pick up with one of the infantry squads as they move house-to-house back toward the mosque. (For their own privacy and protection I will not name or identify in any way, any of those I was traveling with during this incident.)

Many of the structures are empty of people -- but full of weapons. Outside one residence, a member of the squad lobbs a frag grenade over the wall. Everyone piles in, including me.

While the Marines go into the house, I follow the flames caused by the grenade into the courtyard. When the smoke clears, I can see through my viewfinder that the fire is burning beside a large pile of anti-aircraft rounds.

I yell to the lieutenant that we need to move. Almost immediately after clearing out of the house, small explosions begin as the rounds cook off in the fire.

At that point, we hear the tanks firing their 240-machine guns into the mosque. There's radio chatter that insurgents inside could be shooting back. The tanks cease-fire and we file through a breach in the outer wall.

We hear gunshots from what seems to be coming from inside the mosque. A Marine from my squad yells, "Are there Marines in here?"

When we arrive at the front entrance, we see that another squad has already entered before us.

The lieutenant asks them, "Are there people inside?"

One of the Marines raises his hand signaling five.

"Did you shoot them," the lieutenant asks?

"Roger that, sir," the same Marine responds.

"Were they armed?" The Marine just shrugs and we all move inside.

Immediately after going in, I see the same black plastic body bags spread around the mosque. The dead from the day before. But more surprising, I see the same five men that were wounded from Friday as well. It appears that one of them is now dead and three are bleeding to death from new gunshot wounds. The fifth is partially covered by a blanket and is in the same place and condition he was in on Friday, near a column. He has not been shot again. I look closely at both the dead and the wounded. There don't appear to be any weapons anywhere.

"These were the same wounded from yesterday," I say to the lieutenant. He takes a look around and goes outside the mosque with his radio operator to call in the situation to Battalion Forward HQ.

I see an old man in a red kaffiyeh lying against the back wall. Another is face down next to him, his hand on the old man's lap -- as if he were trying to take cover. I squat beside them, inches away and begin to videotape them. Then I notice that the blood coming from the old man's nose is bubbling. A sign he is still breathing. So is the man next to him.

While I continue to tape, a Marine walks up to the other two bodies about fifteen feet away, but also lying against the same back wall.

Then I hear him say this about one of the men:

"He's fucking faking he's dead -- he's faking he's fucking dead."

Through my viewfinder I can see him raise the muzzle of his rifle in the direction of the wounded Iraqi. There are no sudden movements, no reaching or lunging.

However, the Marine could legitimately believe the man poses some kind of danger. Maybe he's going to cover him while another Marine searches for weapons.

Instead, he pulls the trigger. There is a small splatter against the back wall and the man's leg slumps down.

"Well he's dead now," says another Marine in the background.

I am still rolling. I feel the deep pit of my stomach. The Marine then abruptly turns away and strides away, right past the fifth wounded insurgent lying next to a column. He is very much alive and peering from his blanket. He is moving, even trying to talk. But for some reason, it seems he did not pose the same apparent "danger" as the other man -- though he may have been more capable of hiding a weapon or explosive beneath his blanket.

But then two other marines in the room raise their weapons as the man tries to talk.

For a moment, I'm paralyzed still taping with the old man in the foreground. I get up after a beat and tell the Marines again, what I had told the lieutenant -- that this man -- all of these wounded men -- were the same ones from yesterday. That they had been disarmed treated and left here.

At that point the Marine who fired the shot became aware that I was in the room. He came up to me and said, "I didn't know sir-I didn't know." The anger that seemed present just moments before turned to fear and dread.

The wounded man then tries again to talk to me in Arabic.

He says, "Yesterday I was shot... please... yesterday I was shot over there -- and talked to all of you on camera -- I am one of the guys from this whole group. I gave you information. (Do you speak Arabic? I want to give you information)." (This man has since reportedly been located by the Naval Criminal Investigation Service which is handling the case.)

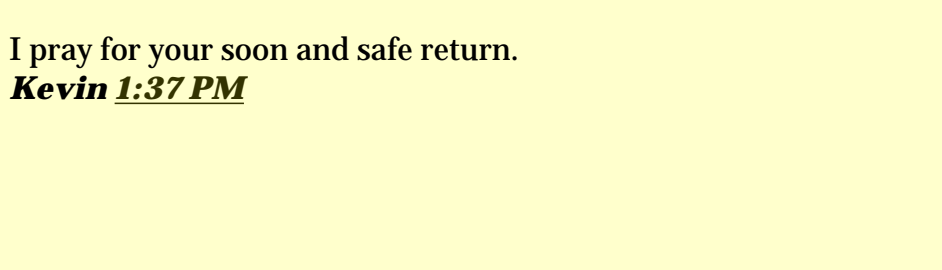
In the aftermath, the first question that came to mind was why had these wounded men been left in the mosque?

It was answered by staff judge advocate Lieutenant Colonel Bob Miller -- who interviewed the Marines involved following the incident. After being treated for their wounds on Friday by Navy Corpsman (I personally saw their bandages) the insurgents were going to be transported to the rear when time and circumstances allowed.

The area, however, was still hot. And there were American casualties to be moved first.

Also, the squad that entered the mosque on Saturday was different than the one that had led the attack on Friday.

It's reasonable to presume they may not have known that these insurgents had already been engaged and subdued a day earlier. Yet when this new squad engaged the wounded insurgents on Saturday, perhaps really believing they had been fighting or somehow posed a threat -- those Marines inside knew from their training to check the insurgents for weapons and explosives after disabling them, instead of leaving them where they were and waiting outside the mosque for the squad I was following to arrive.



During the course of these events, there was plenty of mitigating circumstances like the ones just mentioned and which I reported in my story. The Marine who fired the shot had reportedly been shot in the face himself the day before.

I'm also well aware from many years as a war reporter that there have been times, especially in this conflict, when dead and wounded insurgents have been booby-trapped, even supposedly including an incident that happened just a block away from the mosque in which one Marine was killed and five others wounded. Again, a detail that was clearly stated in my television report.

No one, especially someone like me who has lived in a war zone with you, would deny that a soldier or Marine could legitimately err on the side of caution under those circumstances. War is about killing your enemy before he kills you.

In the particular circumstance I was reporting, it endangered me that the Marine didn't seem to consider the other insurgents, a threat -- the one very obviously moving under the blanket, or even the two next to me that were still breathing.

I can't know what was in the mind of that Marine. He is the only one who does.

But observing all of this as an experienced war reporter who always bore in mind the dark perils of this conflict, even knowing the possibilities of mitigating circumstances -- it appeared to me very plainly that something was not right. According to Lt. Col Bob Miller, the rules of engagement in Falluja required soldiers or Marines to determine hostile intent before using deadly force. I was not watching from a hundred feet away. I was in the same room. Aside from breathing, I did not observe any movement at all.

Making sure you know the basis for my choices after the incident is as important to me as knowing how the incident went down. I did not in any way feel like I had captured some kind of "prize" video. In fact, I was heartsick. Immediately after the mosque incident, I told the unit's commanding officer what had happened. I shared the video with him, and its impact rippled all the way up the chain of command. Marine commanders immediately pledged their cooperation.

We all knew it was a complicated story, and if not handled responsibly, could have the potential to further inflame the volatile region. I offered to hold the tape until they had time to look into incident and begin an investigation -- providing me with information that would fill in some of the blanks.

For those who don't practice journalism as a profession, it may be difficult to understand why we must report stories like this at all -- especially if they seem to be aberrations, and not representative of the behavior or character of an organization as a whole.

The answer is not an easy one.

In war, as in life, there are plenty of opportunities to see the full spectrum of good and evil that people are capable of. As journalists, it is our job to report both -- though neither may be fully representative of those people on whom we're reporting. For example, acts of selfless heroism are likely to be as unique to a group as the darker deeds. But our coverage of these unique events, combined with the larger perspective -- will allow the truth of that situation, in all of its complexities, to begin to emerge. That doesn't make the decision to report events like this one any easier. It has, for me, led to an agonizing struggle -- the proverbial long, dark night of the soul.

I knew NBC would be responsible with the footage. But there were complications. We were part of a video "pool" in Falluja, and that obligated us to share all of our footage with other networks. I had no idea how our other "pool" partners might use the footage. I considered not feeding the tape to the pool -- or even, for a moment, destroying it. But that thought created the same pit in my stomach that witnessing the shooting had. It felt wrong. Hiding this wouldn't make it go away. There were other people in that room. What happened in that mosque would eventually come out. I would be faced with the fact that I had betrayed truth as well as a life supposedly spent in pursuit of it.

When NBC aired the story 48-hours later, we did so in a way that attempted to highlight every possible mitigating issue for that Marine's actions. We wanted viewers to have a very clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding the fighting on that frontline. Many of our colleagues were just as responsible. Other foreign networks made different decisions, and because of that, I have become the conflicted conduit who has brought this to the world.

The Marines have built their proud reputation on fighting for freedoms like the one that allows me to do my job, a job that in some cases may appear to discredit them. But both the leaders and the grunts in the field like you understand that if you lower your standards, if you accept less, than less is what you'll become.

There are people in our own country that would weaken your institution and our nation -- by telling you it's okay, by betraying our guiding principles by not making the tough decisions, by letting difficult circumstances turn us into victims or worse...villains.

I interviewed your Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Willy Buhl, before the battle for Falluja began. He said something very powerful at the time--something that now seems prophetic. It was this:

"We're the good guys. We are Americans. We are fighting a gentleman's war here -- because we don't behead people, we don't come down to the same level of the people we're combating. That's a very difficult thing for a young 18-year-old Marine who's been trained to locate, close with and destroy the enemy with and close combat. That's a very difficult thing for a 42-year-old lieutenant colonel with 23 years experience in the service who was trained to do the same thing once upon a time, and who now has a thousand-plus men to lead, guide, coach, mentor -- and ensure we remain the good guys and keep the moral high ground."

I listened carefully when he said those words. I believed them.

So here, posedately, is how it all plays out: when the Iraqi man in the mosque, tempted a threat, he was your enemy; when he was subdued he was your responsibility; when he was killed in front of my eyes and my camera -- the story of his death became my responsibility.

The burdens of war, as you so well know, are unforgiving for all of us.

I pray for your soon and safe return.

*Kevin*  
**Kevin 1:37 PM**