

# Camp Coyote, Kuwait (2003)

## Fred Lambert

In the open desert just south of Iraq, a few days before going in, Lt. Brock had us write death letters.

He said to put them in envelopes with the appropriate names and addresses written down, and to place them in the very tops of our sea-bags.

"If you get killed," he said, "we can go into storage and find your sea-bag and send that letter to your next of kin. Good to go?"

No one said anything.

The lieutenant nodded. "Choose your words wisely." Then he walked away.

For the next hour, everyone sat on the floor, scribbling into notepads. I turned mine over to a fresh page, sharpened a pencil with a Ka-Bar, and held the graphite point a few inches over the paper, trying to think of what to say.

The tent was quiet. It smelled of bad feet, dead skin and dust. A pensive scratching of pens and pencils emanated from each notebook, erasers whispering through mistakes, and occasionally someone would rip out a page, crumple it up and start over.

I told my mom not to worry, that I died serving a greater cause. I called it a "war of liberation" at one point and said the world would be a better place because of it. To my brother I apologized that our kids wouldn't be able to play together one day. I said he should take the insurance money (about \$125,000 on his end) and throw the biggest party Orlando had ever seen. I told him to give some of the money to Dad, and to tell him that I was sorry there wasn't more time.

The letter went on like this for about a page. I almost broke the pencil signing off. Then I sat there reading it by the light coming in through the tent flap. Outside, the world was blue and beige. On a gravel road that encircled camp, a platoon of Marines ran by, singing the old cadence about dying in a combat zone, "box me up and ship me home . . ."

I thought about what my family would think, reading what I wrote. My eyes brushed over the words a third and fourth time. A lump formed in my throat. So this was it. The last thing I would ever tell them. It didn't seem fair. There wasn't enough time to write something so important. It would take weeks, months, dozens and dozens of drafts to get the words right. Even then, it wouldn't have been enough. I realized, going over that letter, at 19 years old, how little I had to say about death, let alone life—I hadn't been alive long enough to know that much.

After a while it didn't mean anything. Just words on a page. I sealed it into an envelope, wrote down a name and an address, stuffed it into my sea-bag, and secured the bag with a combination lock. Then I stacked it with the others in a pile on the far side of the tent. In a few hours they would go into storage.

We broke for chow and came back and went over the warning order again and segued into personal time, and Marines stripped down into PT gear and lay on their iso-mats or went outside with their hygiene bags to brush teeth and shave and go jerk off in the shitters. I kept looking at the pile of sea-bags. On the bottoms we had marked our names and units in black Sharpie. I could see mine near the top.

The tent was almost empty. No one appeared to be paying attention, so I went to my sea-bag and began working the combination dial, doing so quickly, furtively, afraid someone might see. The lock came open. The letter went into my cargo pocket. Then I re-locked the bag,

spun the combination dial one time, and power-walked away, grabbing my boonie, blouse and weapon on the way out.

The sun was moving westward. On the gravel road, another platoon shuffled by, wearing silkies and green skivvy shirts and running shoes and yellow reflective belts, singing a different cadence, this one about a C-130 rolling down the strip, "Second Platoon is gonna take a little trip . . ."

At a row of blue and white Porta-Johns, men stood in line with smut magazines and wet-wipes and toilet paper, and I continued on toward a smoldering pit where the camp's trash was burned. Heaps of black ash and molten plastic stained the ground that rose up like a parapet on all sides. At its edge I looked around one more time and took the letter out, uncrumpling it and tearing it in half. Then tearing the halves in half. I wadded them up and cast them into the pit. Eventually some poor unfortunate would come out and douse the pit with something flammable, and my letter would burn to cinders. It would drift into the air and into a poisonous cloud of other particulates and into the lungs of anyone walking by or tending the flames. And if I died in the invasion of Iraq, there would be no letter for my family to read, no message from beyond the grave—just the offhand recollections of anyone who knew me, an obligatory condolence from the lieutenant, and a casualty call by two men in dress uniform who would come knocking on the house where my mother lived.

**Fred Lambert** served two tours in Iraq as a rifleman with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, taking part in the 2003 invasion and the Second Battle of Fallujah in 2004. He works as a writing tutor in his hometown of Orlando, Florida.