

# FROM BAGHDAD

With

# Love



*“A Marine, the war  
and a dog  
named Lava”*

## Fallujah, Iraq

The Lava Dogs told me they’d found the little outlaw here at the compound when they stormed the place and the reason he was still here was that they didn’t know what else to do with him. Since they’d decided to use the compound as the command post, and since this starving three-week-old puppy was already there, the choices were either to put him out on the street, execute him, or ignore him as he slowly died in the corner. The excuses they gave me were as follows:

“Not me, man, no way.”

“Not worth the ammo.”

“I ain’t some kind of sicko, man.”

In other words, they had enough pictures already from Fallujah to torture them slowly for the rest of their lives; they didn’t need any more. Warriors, yes; puppy killers, no.

The puppy is named Lava, and while I’d like to say my comrades are creative enough to name him for symbolic reasons—like, you know, if they save him, they save themselves—I’m fairly sure they just couldn’t come up with anything else.

Lava is the newest grunt, de-flea’ed with kerosene, de-wormed with chewing tobacco, and pumped full of MREs.

Just so you understand how tough Lava really is: MREs, officially called “Meals Ready to Eat” but unofficially called “Meals Rejected by Everyone,” are tri-laminate retort pouches containing exactly twelve hundred calories of food, a plastic spoon, and a flameless heater that mixes magnesium and iron dust with salt to provide enough heat to warm the entrée. On the package, the meals state that “Restriction of food and nutrients leads to rapid weight loss, which leads to: Loss of strength, Decreased endurance, Loss of motivation, Decreased mental alertness,”



From his book,  
*From Baghdad With Love*,  
By Lieutenant Colonel Jay Kopelman  
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which supposedly coaxes us into at least opening the pouch to see what's inside.

Lava can't get enough of them, though, and learns real quick how to tear open pouches designed with three-year shelf lives that can withstand parachute drops of 1,250 feet or more.

Still, the best part is how these Marines, these elite, well-oiled machines of war who in theory can kill another human being in a hundred unique ways, become mere mortals in the presence of a tiny mammal. I'm shocked to hear a weird, misty tone in my fellow soldiers' voices, a weird, misty look in their eyes, and weird, misty words that end in ee.

"You had yuckee little buggees all over you when we found you, huh? Now you're a brave little toughee. Are you our brave little toughee? You're a brave, little toughee, yessiree."

And the whole time Lava knows I've got him pegged, and he's stealing glances at me to make sure I see how he's soaking it all up.

The Marines brag about how the puppy attacks their boots and sleeps in their helmets and gnaws nonstop on the wires from journalists' satellite phones up on the roof. They tell me he can almost pick up an ammo belt. They tell me he loves M&M's.

"Did anyone feed Lava this morning?" someone yells out as "I did" comes back from every guy in the room.

He's like a cartoon character on fast forward, always chasing something, chewing something, spinning head-on into something. He stalks shadows and dust balls and pieces of balled-up paper. He can eat an entire cigar in less than two minutes and drag a flak jacket all the way across the floor. I mean, the little shit never stops. If you aren't dragging him along after you as he hangs on to your bootlaces with his teeth, he's up on the roof tangled in wires or lost and wailing in the bowels of somebody's backpack.

You can't yell at him, either, because even though you are an elite, well-oiled machine of war who in theory can kill another human being in a hundred unique ways, you'd still be considered a freak if you yelled at a puppy. He's completely pampered, kept warm, his sticks never thrown out of his sight range so his ego isn't damaged when he can't find them. I find it all pathetic. At first.

But the newest recruit already knows the two most important rules of boot camp by the time I come around: You don't chew on bullets and you only pee outside.

It's like Lava is everyone's kid. It gives them something to be responsible for above and beyond protecting their country and getting their brains blown out or worse in the process. He gives them a routine. And somehow, I become part of it.

Every morning we feed Lava his re-hydrated Country Captain Chicken with Buttered Noodles and then pile out of the house to various posts across the city. Some Marines patrol the streets, some clear buildings looking for weapons, and some get killed and don't do much of anything after that.

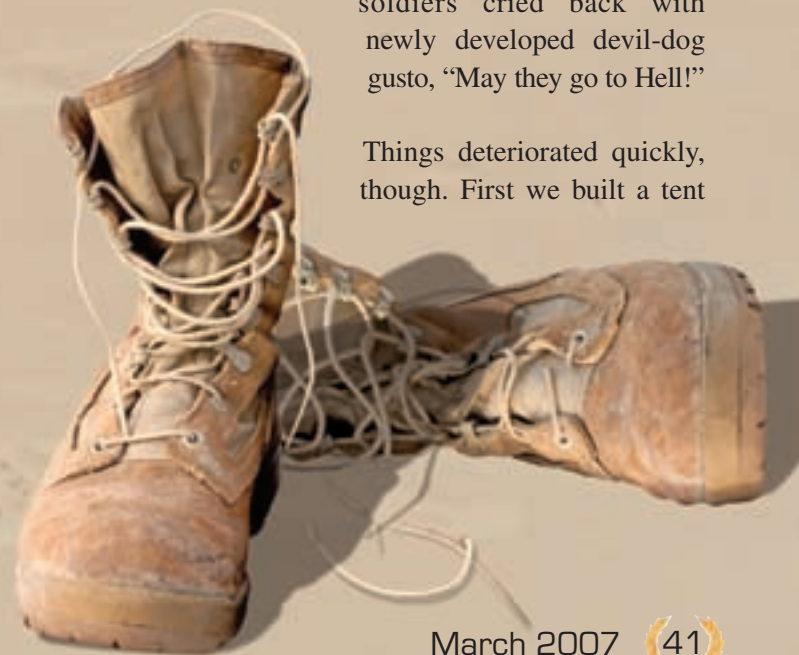
Me, I have the to patrol the streets with three wide-eyed Iraqi soldiers who, in their brand-new, US-issued, chocolate-chip cammies, wave their rifles around as if clearing the way of spider webs. Most still haven't figured out how to keep their rifles safely locked.

They are untrained, out of shape, and terrified. They're members of the Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF)—stouthearted doublespeak for "conquered and unemployed"—who were coaxed by the United States to help root out insurgents in Fallujah before the upcoming national elections.

Several days before we bombed the city, the new Iraqi recruits reported to Camp Fallujah, a few miles southeast of the city, with plenty of promising bravado. When Prime Minister Iyad Allawi made a surprise visit to the camp and urged them to be brave, to go forth and "arrest the killers"

in Fallujah, the young Iraqi soldiers cried back with newly developed devil-dog gusto, "May they go to Hell!"

Things deteriorated quickly, though. First we built a tent



camp for them just outside the walled safety of the main camp. We called it the East Fallujah Iraqi Camp and hoped the name and the handful of American advisers and liaison officers who also stayed there would boost their courage. The Iraqi soldiers endured both regular mortar shelling of their tents by insurgents and verbal bombardments from the Americans who only had one week to prepare them for their first-ever combat experience. So they were prone to the jitters and often woke up in the middle of the night shooting their un-safed rifles wildly. Thank God they didn't know how to aim.

It didn't help that influential Iraqi clerics publicly threatened the IAF soldiers with banishment to Hell, and the insurgent council that controlled Fallujah promised to behead any one of them who entered the city to "fight their own people." In a statement issued by the council just before we attacked, the insurgents stated: "We swear by God that we will stand against you in the streets, we will enter your houses and we will slaughter you just like sheep."

More than two hundred Iraqi troops quickly "resigned," and another two hundred were "on leave." My job now is to baby sit some of the few who remain.

One afternoon about a week after I arrived at the compound, me and a few other Marines are patrolling one of the main streets with them. We're in front of a mosque, right? And they're all bug-eyed and waving their guns around and I'm

a little strung out myself about what's going on around us only I can't let on, because I'm their example of what they're supposed to do and feel and be. But they're so freaked out, they're clearly about to shoot me or one of the other Marines by accident, so I figure the best thing is to make them more afraid of me than they are of the streets—you know, take their minds off it for a little while—so I start yelling "Knock that shit off." and I keep yelling, "Safety your weapons."

And they keep jerking their eyes one way and their rifles another way.

"I said knock that shit off!"

Until I see they've gone into another zone of fear that even I don't have access to, and one of the other Marines, I don't remember who, Tim O'Brien, Dan Doyle, or Mark Lombard, says to me, "Take it easy on them, man, they don't understand English," which kind of ruins my whole show.



Left: Little Lava looks pretty harmless with the absence of remnant boot strings not visible in the picture.

Right: Crowds seem to gather wherever Lava goes. Here a group poses with the star of a new book who still remains humble.

“Yeah, well, they better learn fast.” But I stop yelling and give them a look instead.

Then something rips past us in the air and we freeze. Just like that. It comes from nowhere but explodes a few yards away.

A second rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) comes screaming our way, and I assess the situation in staccato—taking fire from two directions; small arms, medium machine gun and rocket-propelled grenades; two men wounded; Iraqi soldiers running for cover; outnumbered in more ways than one.

I maneuver behind the hood of the Humvee to direct the men as Tim O’Brien, up in the turret, opens up with the MK-19 turret gun laying down a base of covering fire so the rest of us can position to fight.

Dan Doyle picks up a squad automatic weapon and fires toward the southwest.

Tim’s a primary target in the turret, especially when his MK-19 jams and he has to fight with his M4—a shortened version of the M16A4 assault rifle—while he’s trying to clear the MK-19 and make it ready to fire again. But it’s Dan who gets hit. Blood runs down the inside of his left leg.

“Dan, get into that mosque,” I order, but he ignores me and takes off running to get the Humvees positioned so we can evacuate the rest of the wounded, including Mark Lombard, who’s bleeding all over the place but is on the radio calling in our situation report anyway.

Bullets and shrapnel ricochet from the hood of the Humvee inches to my right. Blood soaks Dan’s pant leg.

“Get your ass into that mosque,” I yell again, but he, get this, looks over at me and grins.

“Just a flesh wound.”

Two armor-piercing rounds hit the vehicle and tear through its quarter-inch steel plate easier than needles through skin. I fire my M16A2 and yell for the Iraqi soldiers to direct their fire to the south.

Only I don’t see them. Where the hell are they? I have to get the wounded to safety, so when I see them from the corner of my eye crouched numb between two overturned vehicles, I realize we’re on our own.

*“As I pull a boot off, the puppy grabs hold of the lace and tugs. I tug back. The puppy growls. I growl back.”*

I abandon my M16A2 for a more powerful squad automatic weapon, then run in front of the Humvee and fire away to the south. This apparently inspires one of the Iraqi soldiers to stick his head out, fire two rounds quickly—using me as his cover—and then duck back in. It’s the last I see of the Iraqis for the rest of the thirty-minute fight.

At night we all gather back at the compound, where we cover the windows with blankets and sandbags, clean our weapons, and make sure Lava has something for dinner that he didn’t have the night before.

Then the time comes when you have to put back on all your gear, ready your weapon, and sneak out to the portable toilets down the block. I call them porta-shitters. One of my greatest fears during the weeks I stay at the compound is the possibility of being blasted by an RPG in a porta-shitter.

If you survive that, then you bed down and smoke cigars and review the day’s events with everyone else who made it.

“We found a weapons cache in that old UN food-for-oil place.”

“Yeah, well, we got caught in an alley . . .”

“Yeah, well, we had to transport wounded and they actually fell out of the Humvee onto the street when we got hit with an RPG or something we never saw coming.”

They have nothing on me, though. “Yeah, well, my Iraqi guys decided to take their naps during a firefight . . .”

As we talk, Lava climbs up and over our boots, destroys packages of M&M’s, and paws through our blankets for prey.

“They don’t have a clue out there . . .”

Then the puppy finds my lap and sits between my crossed legs staring out at the other Marines.

“I mean, how do DC brass ever expect to get these guys to secure their country if we’re doing it all for them?”

*A dog who attends a flea circus most likely will steal the whole show.*

*“Prohibited activities for service members under General Order 1-A include adopting as pets or mascots, caring for or feeding any type of domestic or wild animals.”*

I untie my boots, and Lava bites at the laces.

“I swear I am going to accidentally shoot the whole group of them if they don’t shape up.”

As I pull a boot off, the puppy grabs hold of the lace and tugs. I tug back. The puppy growls. I growl back.

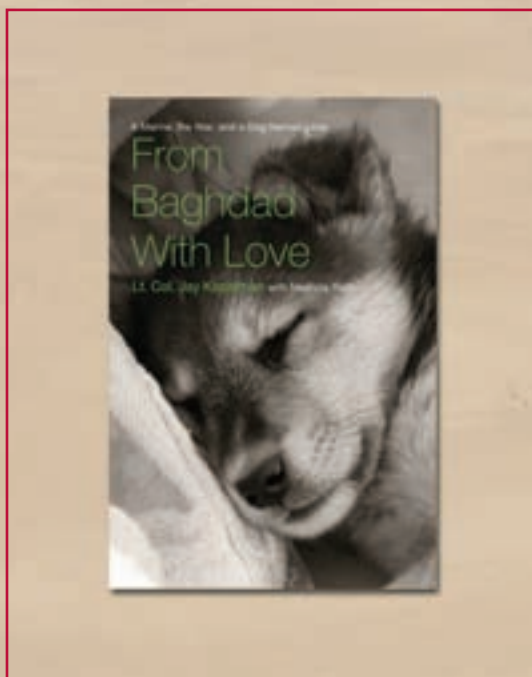
“Hey, what’s with this puppy anyway?” I ask. “What are you guys planning on doing with him?”

No one answers. Then one of the Marines stretches and yawns and says he’s turning in. Others grunt. Lava crawls out of my lap and turns a few circles, flops down, and falls asleep with his nose buried in my empty boot.

Meanwhile, outside on the streets, psychological operations teams blast AC/DC and Jimi Hendrix through loudspeakers, with the additional sound effects of crying babies, screaming women, screeching cats, and howling dogs, in hopes of turning the insurgents’ nerves to shreds. They broadcast insults in Arabic, including “You shoot like goat herders” and “May all the ambulances in Fallujah have enough fuel to pick up the bodies of the mujahideen,” which, along with the mortar, grenades, ceaseless rumbling of Humvees, and twenty different kinds of aircraft flying in precise layers over the city including helicopters, attack jets, and small, pneumatically launched spy drones that roam the skies beaming back images to base from automatic video cameras, create a kind of white noise that allows us all to sleep pretty soundly through the night.

I guess they didn’t want to answer my question about Lava that night, because like everything else in Fallujah during the invasion, nothing but the immediate was worth thinking about. Really, there wasn’t room in your head for anything but what was right in front of you or right behind you or right around the next corner. The future spanned one city block at most. Your dreams consisted of RPGs that missed; lifelong goals were met if you made it back to the compound at night.

So the guys probably weren’t avoiding the subject of what would happen to Lava so much as they were ignoring it. There just wasn’t any room. But jeez, when a puppy picks your boots to fall asleep in, you do start to wonder how he’ll die.



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See, I’ve been a Marine since 1992 when I transferred from the navy, and I know that the little guy is going to die. I knew it right away when I saw him in the hall—this one won’t make it—just like you could look at some of the other guys and think This one won’t make it, because his one eye twitches or This one won’t make it, because he parts his hair on the right instead of the left—superstitious stuff like that, which you know doesn’t make sense but oils your engine anyway. I was thinking This one won’t make it, because he’s too dammed cute.

I’m also a lieutenant colonel, which means I know military rules as well as anyone, and every time I picked Lava up, they darted across my brain

like flares: Prohibited activities for service members under General Order 1-A include adopting as pets or mascots, caring for or feeding any type of domestic or wild animals.