

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

Contemplating The 'Combat Zone'



Col. Andrew Efaw
LETTERS FROM AFGHANISTAN

DEPARTURES from Camp Arifjan are tightly controlled. Soldiers are only allowed outside the gate for official business. Usually that means traveling directly from one U.S. base to another. As the circuit judge, I am on the road fairly frequently. When you leave, you need a phone and a memo stating that you have permission to leave. You're checked by two different sets of guards.

The guards also scan the barcode on your military ID, make sure weapons are on the floor and out of sight, and tell you to remove your uniform top. The idea behind the top removal is to blend in with everyone else on the highway. Somehow I don't think that works — me, a white guy, with a military haircut, wearing the military sand colored t-shirt. It screams, "I'm an American soldier!"

Today is an exception from the "official business" requirement. I'm on a JAG

"morale" trip to the Kuwaiti War Museum and a mall. I and about 15 others are on a Toyota minibus, cruising north on King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz highway through the Kuwaiti desert. The desert is far from pristine. It's littered with moldering camel carcasses, spectacularly crashed cars and trash. Caught on roadside fences, half buried in the sand, and stuck in the branches of scrub, plastic bags wave in the wind like some kind of miscreant national bird.

Today, instead of uniforms, we are in civilian clothes. Before taking this trip, everyone had to attend a cultural awareness

required to carry two 9 mm handguns and ammunition, but most soldiers are skeptical of any real danger in Kuwait. After all, civilian contractors live downtown, are unarmed, and have unrestricted movement around Kuwait.

However, a danger does exist here which soldiers believe in — the Kuwaiti drivers. And our trip today only validates that belief. As soon as we've left Arifjan, a Mercedes lays on his horn and changes lanes in front of us, zipping through an impossibly small — and narrowing — gap between our bus and another car. Tragedy narrowly avoided.

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class. There we were given a rapid-fire list of mostly don'ts.

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Despite the civilian clothes, our group is

Another car speeds past us doing at least 100 miles per hour. The drivers here make Manhattan cabbies look like amateurs. Public service posters on Arifjan warn, “Kuwait is currently first in the world for fatal traffic accidents per capita,” and “One in three Kuwait deaths are auto accident related.”

I don't know if those statistics are accurate, but in my own experience traveling around Kuwait, near misses are frequent.

A month ago traveling at night on to Ali al Saleem, my driver barely avoided a car stopped in the right lane. It wasn't a breakdown. The driver simply stopped in the middle of the highway and was kneeling toward Mecca on the trunk of the car for the evening call to prayer.

Fortunately, we arrive at our destination safely. The War Museum chronicles the first Gulf War. The museum is housed in a small building on a side street in Kuwait City. Outside the building a sign says in Arabic and English, "Not to Forget Museum."

We pay one dinar, which is \$4, for entry. Our guide, wearing jeans and a polo shirt, tells us the Iraqi invasion was "the greatest catastrophe of Kuwait." The museum, itself, however, seems underfunded and neglected.

The main exhibit is a series of battle

dioramas. Each is supposed to light up in turn, and then a voiceover explains the scene, except half of them don't work. So we sit there in the dark until the guide uses his phone as a flashlight and tries to fill in the narrative.

History from a Kuwaiti perspective is a revelation. We are told the brave bands of Kuwaiti resistance fighters fought the Iraqis until they ran out of bullets. Then the Emir of Kuwait, assisted by an international coalition, liberated the country.

The United States is not mentioned as having any sort of central role in the war. At the end of the tour, we pass a wall of pictures of dead Kuwaitis who were tortured to death by the Iraqis, often with power tools. The photos are graphic and moving. Then just before the exit, there's a giant bronze head of Saddam Hussein that

was decapitated from a statue in Tikrit. It's filled with bullet holes, "from angry Iraqis," the guide tells us.

From the museum we travel to the Avenues Mall. The Avenues is easily the largest, most modern, luxurious mall I've ever seen. The contrast between here and the museum is striking. Here, even the black burkad women ooze wealth. I see one wearing rhinestoned Gucci glasses above her veil and with six inch, red Jimmy Choos peeking from beneath her burka. I don't go into a single store. I just wander around, stare at the opulence and contemplate the definition of "combat zone." •

— Col. Andrew Efaw, an attorney with Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell, is on active deployment in the Middle East as a military judge. He is writing a periodic dispatch for *Law Week Colorado* about his experiences abroad.