

## **Once Upon a Time in Iraq:**

A Soldier's Journey from the Wild West to Boulder, Colorado.

Let us say you live in a desert town where neither electricity nor sewer have yet been installed. The sun scotches down on the few plants able to survive in this harsh landscape. There is a gun in every home. And your job is to keep the peace in town between warring native factions with hundreds of years of bad blood between each other. Nearly every day someone dies, but once in a while they just vanish.

This was once the American West: a wild, lawless land of opportunity. But today it is Sadr City, Iraq. This district of Baghdad is a vacuum filled with competing parties. All foreign and domestic interest are vying for power and influence. Order is enforced by the way of the gun. Blood has been split and most assuredly more is yet to come. It is an episode of American history that is often compared to its last full-scale confrontation: The Vietnam War. Particularly in Boulder, Colo., a common sight is the car with an "Iraq: Arabic for Vietnam" sticker plastered to its bumper. However, for Sgt. Schuyler Nippert, who was deployed to Sadr City in 2006 in the Army, it is a false analogy. He maintains, "it's the fuck'n Wild West out there."

And after 15 months out of the Army, Nippert struck out west from childhood home New York. He finally settled down in Colorado--in part because to find solace from his Wild West experience in Iraq and to experience the ultimate freedom.

## **The Wild West of the Middle East**

Iraq was an adventure, "but it's an adventure that can get you *killed*," stresses Sgt. Benjamin Frye, who served with Nippert in the Army 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He and Nippert, he adds, were very lucky to return home alive with the constant threat from roadside bombs, sniper attacks and ambushes from corrupt Iraqi forces. "Not one day went by when you didn't hear of someone getting killed," Frye says matter-of-factly.

In this lawless desert town, a soldier's work is more like an old west sheriff than an Army grunt. By day, they patrol their zone for lawless activity, construct landfills, lay roads and direct traffic among other civic duties. Once Nippert's unit tossed Hello Kitty backpacks out of their vehicle to a mob of cheering, ecstatic Iraqi school children. But by night, they lay down the law. During his time in the Army, Nippert was in over 100 raids. In the dead of night, his unit would bust into the houses of bomb builders. When mass graves started appearing around Sadr City filled with beheaded, shorts-wearing women they went after the Sheikh's in charge of these marauding death squads enforcing religious law. Spc. Bobby Sutton, who served alongside Nippert, concluded that: "It was a neighborhood that was extremely shady, with untrustworthy people and opportunists."

Interest groups in the area had their own doctrine of manifest destiny. Men from Nippert's unit says increased stress on nation building, the Surge in 2007, and training Iraqi forces started to turn Sadr City around into an almost decent neighborhood, relatively. But, during this first deployment, the area was still widely untamed. Sunni and Shiite factions kill one another in their uncompromising duty to enforce their religious laws. Iranian insurgents infiltrate the country in their apparent desire to return to the golden age of the Persian Empire. The U.S. continues to

follow its self-anointed, inexorable duty to spread democracy around the globe. And locals, who are determined and emboldened enough, gang-up to take back their neighborhoods. It is a place where Nippert learned to sleep with one eye open.

Even if perpetually vigilant for IEDs (improvised explosive devices), RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), and snipers armed with anti-tank rounds, Sadr City has a hundred treacherous ways to kill a soldier. One night while on a stakeout in town, Sgt. Jon Feeney, who also served in Nippert's unit, was relieving himself at a urinal in an empty bathroom when he felt and heard something thud into his boot. He looked down and saw a camel spider lurking by his feet. Soldiers say these creatures can be as large as a Frisbee and can top out at 30 miles per hour, screaming as they run. Feeney claims that it hit with such force his foot moved three inches. In fright he lowered his rifle and screamed, "Get some mother fucker!" But before unloading his rifle in the dark, Nippert came in, calmed him down and ordered him to zip up his pants back up.

Nippert learned to figuratively sleep with one eye open there, too. The greatest threat was the corruption among Iraqi officials. Sutton believes that those they trained and instructed to take over police and security duties in Iraq were 70 percent corrupt, "and that's being generous," he says. In Iraq, Sutton never allowed the Iraqi police he was working with to use their cell phones when working with him and Nippert. When he saw an Iraqi police officer texting on his phone, his unit would later be ambushed. Out here, it was common for individuals from different religious sects to join the police force with the intention of infiltrating the U.S. Army, putting pressure on Iraqi politicians or just to push people around. Many of the bomb builders and snipers Nippert arrested had police identification badges on their bodies.

Like a rodeo-cowboy, U.S. soldier perform a job that is unforgiving of error, and a moment's carelessness can maim or kill. Iraq is unlike any other war in American history, in part, because of the prevalence of roadside bombs. At any moment, the next footstep or next tire rotation can trigger an explosion could be your last. And when an IED detonates, it looks like the land itself is attacking. For this reason, while on patrol Humvees drove at less than five miles an hour, gleaning the roadside for possible booby-traps. According to an article, by *The Washington Post* there were 2,500 IEDs during Nippert's first deployment, accounting for 69 percent of all U.S. casualties. This makes roadside bombs the leading threat to U.S. Soldiers in Iraq.

This reality is viewed with stoicism. The constant danger: "That's just a day in the life," says Sgt. Benjamin Frye. It is a mentality that is essential out there. "If you saw a baby explode in front of you, you can do two things," Nippert explains. "You can either have a mental breakdown, or you can say, 'fuck it,' and that's the only way to get through it."

The trade-off for all this? Many of the incentives that brought settlers to the West: adventure, freedom, and the opportunity to make a name for yourself.

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In April of 2006, in the middle of the night, Nippert and the five soldiers under his command were in an outpost outside of Base Rustamaya, which one soldier affectionately calls "Rocket-maya." As Team Leader, Nippert establishes an observation post in an abandoned apartment complex and prepare for a twelve-hour stakeout of a highway with a notorious record for roadside bomb attacks. On the fourth floor, Nippert's unit heaves off their sweaty, clunky body armor; even at

night temperatures never drop below 100 degree Fahrenheit. These observation posts are Nippert's favorite missions. It is just he and his squad out under the quiet night sky, free from superiors giving him orders. They can also be incredibly dangerous, and people have been known to disappear in the Iraqi night.

Nippert calls this six-lane highway on the main supply route one of the most dangerous roads in Iraq. Since before his division arrived, this four mile stretch had been experiences at least one explosion everyday. The common bombs were IEDs, which in their most tame form can bust up a Humvee's undercarriage turning the normally bow-legged vehicle into a knock-kneed horse. But in 2006, EFPs, explosively forced penetrators, began appearing. These are cone shaped charges, usually copper, that turn molten and melt through a vehicle's armor. It is a device Sutton begrudgingly calls, "extremely effective." It was this variety of roadside bomb that caused him 2nd and 3rd degree burns on much of his body when his Humvee rolled over one. He was Nippert's unit's only casualty.

This is the nature of confrontation and these dodgy, hit-and-run tactics frustrated Nippert and his squad to no end. Actual engagements like the ones soldiers train for are few and far between in Iraq. During his Army career, Nippert was involved in over 100 raids, hundreds of rocket and mortar attacks on Base Rustamaya, four to five accounts of small arms fire and five IED explosions. Soldiers and civilians were dying every day, but there was no enemy to blame. "It was really hard to get the enemy to bring the fight," Nippert said. Except, on this night. By morning, Nippert and his squad's position will be compromised and involved in the only true firefight of his Army career.

In the apartment complex, Nippert first saw movement on median of the road through the grainy, green vision of his night-vision goggles. Trucks flanked their position. Armed men dismounted and took fighting positions, surrounding the building. Nippert calls the activity into the base dispatcher over the radio and the dispatcher replies that Iraqi police are in the area. "But they don't look like police," Nippert says. "They look like fucking outlaws."

But their hands were tied behind their backs by the rules of engagement. They could not fire unless first fired upon. Over the radio, Nippert went back and forth with the dispatcher over whether they could defend themselves as these figures darting around like coyotes conducted ever more aggressive movements. When they appeared to be aiming at their room, Nippert was told they did not have permission to engage. After another truck arrived and flipped on a spotlight that directly hit their position, they are still told over the radio, "no permission. You have to take fire first." Only when they heard the snaps and pops of small arms fire and felt the falling debris of mortar being chipped away were they told, "Rock and roll."

Frye calls Nippert a fast-thinking, fast-talking soldier who shoots from the hip. Their sniper's scope was not equipped with night vision and when the firefight began he shouted over the radio that he could not see, that he needed "illum." Nippert then runs out on the balcony into hail of gunfire, levels his grenade launcher over the attackers and pops off flares into the night sky, which parachute back to earth illuminating the highway like high noon. Feeney, who was in a Humvee blocks away at the time, was driving to the scene when Nippert went out on the

balcony. "I've never seen someone shoot off so many flairs out of a grenade launcher at one time," Feeney says. "He was happy as a mother fucker."

Yet no one is certain who these desperados were that night. With so many competing and opposing factions in the area, no one will ever be certain. Sutton and Feeney claim that they were Iraqi Police. Feeney says earnestly, "It wasn't like a couple of guys; this was a legitimate account of Iraqi police with all intentions of killing us." But Nippert stays convinced they were other forces dressed up as Iraqi police.

Roadside bombs, more often than not, were placed by a kid who was paid American money. When they caught a 15-year-old, placing a suitcase on the road, all he could tell them as that a man with a moustache paid him \$50.00 to do it. When they did catch and arrest a bomb builder, it hardly ever was the Iranian insurgent placing the fearsome EFPs that were so devastating. They once caught two men placing a bomb on the road that lead to the arrest of eight people, committing crimes, thefts, rapes and murders. "It just ended up being a gang of ruffians, but you know that's cleaning up the city." Nippert said, "It reminded me of that old west saying: *there's a new sheriff in town.*"

The nature of this combat was too much for many veterans of the initial invasion of Iraq, Nippert recalls. Especially the ones that were deployed before because the enemy they knew, the enemy that shot at them and killed their buddy, was not there anymore, but they were forced to interact with people who looked like just like them: same skin colors, same accents, same uniforms.

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In 2009, Nippert was on his second deployment, the worse out of the two. He worked in a police station in Nazaria, Iraq, as a “cultural liaison.” Where before, he would not step outside of the base without 300 rounds for his M4 assault rifle, full body-armor, grenade launcher and three to four fragmentation grenades, here he wore no helmet, no armor and only carried a holstered pistol on his hip. This was not the war he signed up for. Here he can sleep at the Iraqi police station in town, and that is too much for him.

As a high school dropout, the 2001 invasion of Iraq played out before him in between taking orders and waiting tables in a restaurant in upstate New York. On the television, in the corner of the Pizza Hut, Nippert watched the CNN coverage of tanks riding in formation to Baghdad, kicking up dirt behind them like Rough Riders. He saw this and a day later decides to join the Army. But he joined the infantry when he learned that it was not just one guy in the tank riding through the desert. Nippert says that he scored high on his military aptitude test, but he joined the infantry anyway because he wanted that combat experience. “I wanted to be kick’n down doors, shoot’n terrorists in the face. That’s what I signed up to do,” Nippert explained. In Nazaria he was not doing that. After this second deployment, Nippert’s division was slotted to return to Nazaria within a year. So when his contract with the Army expired in 2009 he had no intentions of renewing it.

But Frye, who currently lives in New York, would choose a quiet, boring deployment over a wild, dangerous adventure. He has experienced five deployments. Even though he initially signed up for the later, he says, resolutely after a long pause of deliberation, “It’s not worth your life, even if it is more interesting.”



### **Go West, Young Man, to that Rocky Mountain High.**

Coming out of the Army in 2009, Nippert suffered from what many veterans have dubbed, “adjustment disorder,” difficulty returning back to civilian life. But the real suffering came from his unwillingness to adjust. Back in New York, he tolerated the urban hostility and confrontational attitude of East Coast while he obtained GED. He continued his education at community college and graduated with an associate’s degree. But North Easterners and New York State began to irk him. After years of fighting for people’s freedom, homophobic and racist remarks on the streets began to irk him. Also, he does not respond to confrontation well. When some random passer-by on the street might shoulder-check him walking down the sidewalk, he would react like he was trained to react: like it is a life or death situation. After years of having people trying to kill him, he had enough. “I don’t want to be around physical confrontations. I don’t want to be around violence. I don’t want to be around it,” Nippert says resolutely. So he left and struck it out west-- heading to Austin, where he had friends from the Army.

In Central Texas, Nippert continued to deal with his adjustment in the typical veteran fashion: the need for speed and the need for danger--often combining the two. Him and Army buddies would plan on getting drunk, jumping into the car and rip it at 140 miles per hour around town shooting at signs, trees and whatever else roamed at night out the car window.

While it was relatively easy and socially acceptable to own a gun in Austin, smoking marijuana was not. Texas was “western,” it was not about escaping the schema of the East Coast and making a new life for yourself. “In Texas, it’s about moving out to Texas and being Texan,”

Nippert explained, ““You move to Colorado to do whatever you want, buy guns and shoot them while smoking weed.” He spent only four months in Austin before pushing onward to attend the University of Colorado Boulder. Nippert’s father briefly attended CU and eventually graduated from Colorado State University before Nippert was born. His older half-brother moved out to Telluride immediately after finishing college in New York. He did not apply to any other schools.

### **The High Plains Drifter of the Rugby Field:**

In Boulder, Nippert finally has the liberty to be himself. On the grass field of CU, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, the rugby ball sails out of bounds and the two teams realign in a scrum for possession, called a “scrum.” Nippert, in a yellow, number two jersey, crouches into place. He looks not like a lineman before the snap, but like a cougar before the pounce. Across from him, the white jerseys of the opposing team mirror his movements and form the scrum. Three more yellow jerseys join Nippert and the four lock arms, binding together. The referee shouts, “Pause, Crouch, Touch, ENGAGE!” And the two opposing sides hammer into each knocking skulls and shoulders as they force the other side back from the ball. Nippert, playing the Hooker position, hooks his foot around the ball and kicks it to a teammate. He flies down the field with the ball only ten yards before being tackled and thrown back to Earth. Nippert emerges from the dog-pile with grass stains on his shirt and single trail of red blood snaking down his knee.

It may seem contradictory to play rugby and maintain an aversion to violence. But Nippert explains it “constructive violence,” a kind of violence far removed from the level of aggression he was acclimated to in Iraq. “It’s just a completely different scale,” he explains. In Boulder and on the University of Colorado rugby team, Nippert has found solace from the Wild West of Iraq. Unlike the battlefield where, every step could be your last, everyone goes home after the 80-minute match. Where he was not entirely sure which forces were friendly and which were foes, the sides in rugby football are broadcasted loud and clear by their florescent jerseys. And where he did not fit in on the East Coast, and persecuted as a pothead in Austin, he finds comradely with arms locked around his teammates on the field. Nippert calls himself “front row guy,” a player always in the pack of a scrum. Many players avoid this dangerous, painful position. “I kind of like it though,” he explains. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere but the front row.” It is a position where he belongs given his size and strength. He is one of the shortest players on CU’s team, but also one of the strongest. He lumbers down the field, muscles jostling on his frame, but in the scrum he strikes hard, fast and pushes the other players around so easily it is like he is herding cattle.

And its therapeutic for him, “Now when I’m playing Rugby and I’m running on the side and they throw the ball to me and I’m about to score the Tri, there’s that same pressure. I have to catch this, everyone is depending on me. When I drop it, it’s humiliating. When I catch it, I’m like ‘Fuck’n yeah!’ And it’s never going to be the same as the Army. But it’s the same feelings, it’s all the same things just a different scale,” He says. After this evening’s match he will smoke, and out here in the West, that is now enough for him.

## **Once Upon a Time in Colorado:**

In his own apartment this rugby-playing, non-confrontational, marijuana-smoking, athletic, CU student veteran leans back on his couch and props his feet up on the coffee table and relaxes. His CU Rugby tote bag rests deflated on the floor. Next to his feet casually rest two glass-blown pipes. The funky, pungent stank of freshly burned cannabis buds linger in the nostrils. Nippert says there has not been a day since moving to Colorado that he has not smoked. On the kitchen table there is not so much “bowl of weed” but a platter of still smoldering buds. But on top of the mantle stands a small blue badge with a silver musket and silver wreath--a combat infantry badge, one of the most coveted honors in the infantry. The arrangement of this apartment is the freedom that he fought for in Iraq and found in Colorado: space for tolerance. It is what lured settlers, Mormons, outlaws and misfits to the West generations ago. And it still lures people here today. The West was, and is, a space to be yourself in all of your superficial contradictions without persecution. A place where Nippert can smoke after going out for a jog, where he can be non-confrontational but shout “Strike Hard! Move Fast! Kill Shit!” while warming up before a rugby match, and where he can be a proud Iraq War veteran at a notoriously liberal university. To him, Sgt. Schuyler Nippert explains, says: “Colorado represents what the U.S. should be. Everyone ought to have the ultimate amount of freedom here.”

