

*Former soldier in Saddam's army
is now a U.S. Soldier helping improve Iraq:*

'The uniform I'm wearing, I wear first for my people.'

By Sgt. David Bryant
36th Infantry Division

Decisions can be painful to make, and sometimes choices can alter the entire course of a person's life. For one 36th Infantry Division Soldier, the tormenting decisions he was forced to make would lead him to a life fraught with danger, isolation and a journey that he never expected.

Sgt. Mahad Ahmed, a 36th Infantry Division translator working as a mayor's cell noncommissioned officer in Headquarters and Support Company, Special Troops Battalion, was born in Baghdad in 1976, three years before Saddam Hussein officially took control. His father, a pharmacist, was not a big fan of the new regime, although they continued to live and work in the nation's capital. With all of his siblings either in college or working respectable jobs, his father stayed silent to ensure their survival.

It was the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 that forced Ahmed, like so many others, to make the decisions that would lead him down a new, perilous path.

"I was a corporal in the Iraqi army stationed at a place called Taji. I was always paying money to not go anywhere," he said. "The corruption in the Iraqi army at the time was very well known — you pay money, you don't have to go out on patrol; you pay money, and you don't have to do guard duty. Then when the war started, I couldn't do that anymore and I

had to stay there for a couple of weeks. I almost died three times."

The first incident occurred when two of his friends were attempting to see who could clear his AK-47 assault rifle the fastest. The charging handle on the rifle they were using for the competition had been pulled back so hard that it caused a hair-trigger. One went to pick up the rifle and touched the trigger, setting off the rifle and putting a bullet through the other's back.

"We took him to the hospital, but he died a few minutes before we made it there," Ahmed said.

Two days later, a second brush with death shook the corporal, who was serving as a physical fitness instructor in Saddam's army.

"We were digging holes for shelters. I was outside the hole and some of my friends were inside it, and we were talking. They stopped talking and started looking at something behind me," Ahmed said. "I was like, 'What's going on? Why are [you] guys not saying anything?' The next thing I know, I'm flying through the air and dropping onto them. A rocket landed about half a mile behind me. Lucky for me it didn't blow up, but the shockwave from the hit threw me into the shelter hole."

After that he'd had enough, he said, and simply dropped his weapon and walked away.

"I figured, I don't like the government, don't like anyone in it, so why am I holding a weapon and just waiting to die?" he said. "And when I left, I looked behind and there were about 40 soldiers coming

after me; they were leaving too.

"I took a bus back to Baghdad, and when I got there I couldn't find my family. They had run north to Diyala, which was a place the U.S. Army didn't bomb at that time."

For a time, Ahmed said he just stayed in Baghdad and watched the war. Soon after, an incident occurred that would land him a new job.

"There were two guys walking around my neighborhood, posing as followers of Hussein, a respected Shia imam," Ahmed recalled. "Two brothers who were also Shia invited them to lunch. The guys told them to go away. The brothers were like, 'We just invited you to lunch, why do you have to be so mean about it?' One of the followers pulled out a 9 mm handgun, and the other a grenade. We found out they were not Shia followers — they were Syrians — not even Iraqi. They were members of Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen, 'the Sacrificers.'

"The guy with the 9 mm ran through an alley and was caught by Iraqis and beaten to death. The guy with the grenade, though, got inside the alley but wasn't fast enough," Ahmed said. "The people trapped him in the middle of the alley, all armed with AK's. The guy couldn't go anywhere, so he swallowed the grenade and blew himself up.

"We checked the body and saw a letter saying, 'Kill nine Shia and you will go to heaven. If you kill no one and come back home, you will be killed. If you get captured, kill yourself,' which is what he

did. At the bottom was the signature of his mom and dad. We checked the body, and his passport was Syrian. The people were outraged and spit on his body. We dragged the body to a garden area we had in the middle of our houses and buried him there. That's how my story with the U.S. Army started."

A platoon of American Soldiers came by and wanted to know what happened. Ahmed explained to the lieutenant in charge everything that had happened.

"The L.T. asked, 'Where are you from?' I said, 'I'm from here. That's my house right there.' He said, 'No, you're not from here. You're lying. Where in the States are you from?'" Ahmed said. "I told him that I'm not from the States and had never been there. My house was right here. They didn't believe it because of my accent.

"I spoke English since I was 15 years old. I learned it by myself, watching movies. Instead of just watching movies with sound, I would mute the sound and read

the translations at the bottom and just try to speak it."

The incident ended with an offer to become a translator for the U.S. Army. His father was against it, as Saddam had not yet been caught, and he feared Saddam still had a chance of returning to power. His mother and siblings helped convince his father to allow it, however, and Ahmed soon began working at a forward operating base outside of Tarmiyah, just north of Baghdad.

"Tarmiyah is the most dangerous place, not just in Iraq, but also in the world," Ahmed explained. "Al-Qaida called Tarmiyah the capital of the Islamic Iraq, because all the bad guys, all the al-Qaida people, went there from other countries such as Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia. From there they would be spread out across the country."

His first week on the job brought home just how dangerous it was. On a trip to visit the local police chief, a meeting known only to the Soldiers and the police

chief himself, he had his first experience with an improvised explosive device. The highway leading to Tarmiyah — one he said was normally quite busy — was deserted. A sport utility vehicle was blocking traffic a few miles ahead of the convoy, and a media crew from Al Jazeera was waiting on the side of the road.

"The gunner spotted the first IED, and we had to call EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) since there wasn't really any [quick reaction force] back then," he said. "We found out it was a string of seven IEDs linked together. They were waiting for us to get into the middle of the chain to blow it up. The SUV blocking the highway took off and we were unable to find them. Al Jazeera was videotaping and everything. That night in the news, they reported that two Bradleys had been burned and one U.S. Soldier had been killed. They made it look like we lost a lot, and the IED never even went off. At first I thought, 'Maybe that's in another place.' Until they said it occurred in Tarmiyah."



Photo by Sgt. David Bryant

Sgt. Mahad Ahmed, a translator working as a mayor's cell noncommissioned officer in Headquarters and Support Company, Special Troops Battalion, 36th Infantry Division, oversees Iraqi crews clearing out a section of Contingency Operating Base Basra as part of the transition of U.S. forces out of Iraq.

For a while, Ahmed said he got along well with the people of Tarmiyah, helping them relate to the American forces. They still received a constant barrage of mortar and rocket-propelled grenade fire, but it didn't bother him because he was helping his people.

One day, while American troops were in the middle of rebuilding the police station after a fire, a mortar round meant for the Americans overshot the police station and landed on a house, killing the entire family within except for one son. The survivor immediately went before the tribal elders for vengeance, and the following morning, came to Ahmed.

"He said, 'My dad's blood is on you.' I looked at him and asked, 'Why?' He told me I was the only Iraqi there with the U.S. Army, so I was the one bringing them here," Ahmed said. "I said, 'No, sir, you got that totally wrong. I'm here helping rebuild the police station, and the people who killed your family are the bad guys.' He told me, 'I don't know the bad guys. I know you.'"

From that moment on, Ahmed said he was marked for death in that city. The unit he was working for took him home

would be restricted to the FOB.

"The bad guys had worked a deal with an Iraqi army guy to invite me to lunch and kill me. They were waiting for me there and in Tarmiyah, so I could not go back anymore," he said. "The Iraqi army guy was going to get paid \$100,000 for inviting me to lunch. And the bad guys somehow knew where I was working at. Fortunately, the intel made it to my unit first. The one who was supposed to invite me to lunch was killed a week later.

"I had to live on base and be a stranger in my own country, be a foreigner in my own country. [I couldn't] save my family from all of this if I went back home; they wouldn't just kill me, they would kill my whole family," Ahmed added. "So I was safe if I was away from my family. We got rid of the bad guys, and then along came the Mehdi Army, and same thing: They wanted me for working with the U.S. Army. Everyone was looking for me."

"I have a saying," said Ahmed, who was nominally raised a Muslim but does not consider himself one. "'God brought me to life, so God can take my life whenever he wants.' So whenever I went on a mission outside the wire, I'd put my body

about anything else."

Time passed, always under the threat of death. Ahmed said his boss finally approached him and asked him how long he intended to stay.

"I said, 'I don't know. Until everything gets OK, I guess?' He said, 'No. Congress signed the Special Immigrant Visa program. You need to go do it,'" Ahmed said. "I asked him what that was. He said, 'You are a U.S. Army employee, so when you go to the States, you'll have all the rights of a resident green-card holder. You won't have to apply for anything; you will automatically have everything a citizen does.'"

His family was sad he would be leaving, but also happy he finally had a way out. His unit helped him get all the paperwork together, and the two-star general in charge of northern Iraq who Ahmed had been translating for immediately signed it and sent it forward with his recommendation. It was the very beginning of the SIV program, and his paperwork was approved within three months. His next step would be the interview to grant his visa.

The interview was originally set up at the U.S. Embassy in Jordan, a country he had already been banned from entering at the whim of a border guard who didn't like his looks. He rescheduled it for Syria, which would prove to be nearly as dangerous as Iraq for Ahmed.

The political climate in Syria was actively hostile to anyone associated with the American military, and those Iraqis who had chosen to work for the U.S. Army were hated the most. The landlord of the apartment Ahmed rented while he went through the interview process for his visa continuously fished for information about his reason for coming to Syria. So he came up with a believable lie.

"I told them that my mom had kidney failure and that I was doing all the tests and interviews in hopes to take my mom to the States, or Canada or Germany, to have the surgery where I could donate one of my kidneys to her," he said. "They respected that. And, as usual, I was always talking bad about the U.S. Army. It was the only way to stay alive."

Ahmed finally completed his interviews and was called in to get his visa. The embassy employee who gave him the visa told him he needed to get a plane

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to Baghdad and informed him he needed to go straight to the FOB the next day, bypassing Tarmiyah. He could continue going on missions anywhere else, but that would be one city forever closed to him.

Not long after that, however, his unit informed him he could no longer go to his home in Baghdad either. They had received an intelligence report of a plot to kill Ahmed, and for his own safety he

armor on, but I'd have no plates in it. I got my butt chewed many times by the first sergeant, but I didn't listen. I did whatever I wanted to do," Ahmed said. "A lot of Soldiers were afraid to be near me because of possible snipers, but I didn't care. I kept doing it anyway, because what I was doing I was doing for my people. I can die for my people; I would give everything for my people and my family. I don't care

ticket to the States immediately and should get out of the country as fast as he could.

"I asked him what was up, and he told me that there had been four of us to come to the embassy under the SIV program. I was the only one to show up for my visa," Ahmed said. "I asked him about the three others, but he said they were still looking for them. I heard later that one had been beaten to death, and the two others had been taken by Syrian intelligence. The one who had been beaten to death had been living in a hotel, and he had told a janitor that he was a U.S. Army employee. The janitor was an Iraqi, and he called the Syrian authorities on him. The other two had relatives call the Syrian authorities on them; their own family turned them in."

When he arrived in the States at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, Ahmed carried a large sealed envelope with all of his paperwork. The customs officials had been expecting him, but he said they were unsure of what to do with him; he was the first person to arrive in the U.S. under the SIV program. He was led to the immigrant interview room, told to have a seat, and instructed to hand the paperwork to the person behind the desk.

"Not one minute later, a lieutenant came in. He called my name, and I was scared to death, thinking maybe I had done something wrong," Ahmed recalled. "He said, 'Welcome to the States.' I said, 'That's it?' He said, 'Yeah, that's it. Welcome to the States.' I signed my visa, did my fingerprint and walked out the door. But, I was the only one on the plane who had no one there. So I just stood there, looking left and right, wondering where I was going to go."

Unsure of his future, he said he wound up calling a woman he'd met online who lived in Tucson, Ariz. She was excited he'd made it to America and immediately invited him to come out and stay with her.

The only things Ahmed said he could think of when he arrived were food and sleep. He stayed at his friend's house for two weeks and then called an Iraqi friend at the FOB where he had worked in Iraq. The friend gave him a number for an uncle who lived in Dallas, Texas.

"I called his uncle, who told me he'd

been waiting for me to call," Ahmed said. "He asked me where I was, and when I told him Tucson, he told me, 'Hang up and wait for 10 minutes.' Literally 10 minutes later, I got a call from another person, who asked me what address I was at. He said to get my bags ready because he'd be there in 15 minutes."

The man who came and picked him up turned out to be one of the richest men

came out to visit Ahmed with another Soldier in the translator military occupational specialty, 09L. After discussing it with them for a while, he decided to join, and not just for the educational benefits.

"I did it to prove a point: All Iraqis are not bad guys," Ahmed said.

After completing basic training and Advanced Individual Training, Ahmed worked for a time assisting recruiters in

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in Tucson, a native Iraqi who became a U.S. citizen and used his doctorate in economics to become a real estate mogul. He and the friend's uncle in Dallas knew each other when both left Iraq during the rise of Saddam in the 1970s. Both ended up staying in the U.S. after losing family members to Saddam's brutal reign.

Ahmed stayed with his friend's uncle for a few weeks before finally getting his own apartment and a job at a printing company. The pay was only \$8 an hour, but it paid the bills. He kept in contact with his former bosses in Iraq, and it was his former commander, a National Guard Soldier, who convinced him to go enlist in the Texas Army National Guard.

"He knew that my dad's dream was for me to finish my education, get a master's degree or something from the United States. He used that on me; he said, 'Are you going to let your dad down? Are you going to keep working for \$8 an hour? How are you going to study?'" Ahmed said. "I kept telling him that I'd think about it, and he eventually convinced me."

The captain in charge of recruiting at Camp Mabry, the headquarters of all Texas Military Forces, located in Austin, Texas,

finding more translators. He was soon deployed with the 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team to his native country, where he served as a translator a mere 15 miles from his old home.

Finding a job after he returned to Texas proved difficult, and he soon had no money to live on and would go days without eating, he said. The opportunity to deploy with the 36th Infantry Division headquarters for Operation New Dawn came as a blessing. He moved to Austin for the unit's pre-mobilization and is now serving a second tour in his native land as a liaison between U.S. Division-South and local Iraqi contractors, assisting in the transition of U.S. forces out of Iraq.

Ahmed's love for his people led him down a long, dangerous road; a road that is still not safe for him, he said. He's not always happy with the path his native country takes, but he feels he's done his part to give his fellow Iraqis the freedom they need to become a truly great nation.

"Iraqis were victims, trapped in a cage for 35 years under Saddam Hussein," he said. "But the U.S. Army, we came and opened that cage wide open. The uniform I'm wearing, I wear first for my people."