



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive

Mighty Pen Project

2024

Grace on the Gulf

Cam Torrens

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/196

This 2001-2020 Air Force is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

I enter my wing commander's office, drop into the chair behind my desk, and check another box on my paper to-do list—even though I don't feel like I've done anything. Although the US Air Force has maintained a presence at this remote Kuwaiti Air Base since the early 1990s, we didn't start running one-year tours here until the US invaded Iraq in 2003. I'm the sixth Colonel selected to lead this base. This is Day Three of “walking and talking”—meeting the troops I'll command for 362 more days. I recognize how important face-to-face contact is with my subordinates, but my eyes can't help drift to the middle item on the list—my theater orientation flight to Baghdad, Iraq, next Thursday. The worst part of command is flight frequency. I'll have too many obligations to the seven-thousand servicemen and women at this base to fly as often as I want. But the best part of command is that I *have* to fly. You don't run an operational air base without proving your credibility as an operator.

At the bottom of the list are more meetings. Meet the judge advocate general, meet the Office of Special Investigation detachment commander, connect with the chaplain.

Whoa. I pencil the last one in above my theater orientation flight. Can't hurt to fit in the chapel visit before I fly into the combat zone.

My vice commander, Pete Quindlen, pokes his head in my office. “Boss, we got an issue.”

“What's up?”

“General Ahmad wants you in his office like ten minutes ago. And I'm pretty sure I know why.”

I stand. “Walk with me. What happened?”

Pete steps to the side as I exit my office, then tucks in beside me as we walk down the hall. My executive officer stands as I nod at her. “Already heard, Sir. Good luck.”

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

“Gate security on the north side stopped General Ahmad and wouldn’t let him on our base,” my vice says. “When they asked for his ID, he told them he didn’t need it, because it’s his base. We’re his guests.”

“Shit. He’s right. That’s exactly what he told us the first day. Our guys are supposed to give him and whoever is with him access anytime he needs it.”

“Right. Except the SF guys rotated in the same day you and I did. They didn’t get the message.”

I leave my number two within the confines of our US compound to fix the gate issue with the SF squadron commander while I drive to General Ahmad’s office. A young Kuwaiti officer ushers me through the door. General Ahmad greets me with a triple kiss I’m still getting used to and waves me to a chair. His aide brings me a cup of tea. The general asks about my family. I’m impressed with his recall—we only met three days ago, yet he remembers my wife’s name.

Fifteen minutes of conversation pass and I’m struggling to keep my mouth shut. I want to apologize and explain to General Ahmad what we are doing to fix the issue. I want to assure him this will not happen again.

Finally, during a two-second pause in conversation, I say, “General, about today—”

General Ahmad raises his hand. “Cam. Is it fixed?”

“Yes, Sir. I am briefing—”

The general raises his hand again. “I’m sure you have taken care of this. What I called you to my office for was to invite you to join my brothers and I on Thursday evening for dinner. Will you be able to join us?”

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

He's rocked me on my heels just a bit. I'm like a second lieutenant, ready to beg for a second chance, and General Ahmad is inviting me to join his family to break bread. But Thursday is the day I've blocked off as my flying day. Or at least it used to be.

"Yes, sir. I'll be there."

So begins my most important relationship of the year. After the liberation of Kuwait by coalition forces in 1991, the Kuwaitis have been grateful and gracious hosts. But that was seventeen years ago, and stories abound about US leaders in Kuwait who have taken their hosts' hospitality for granted. The US three-star in charge of our Air Force in Central Command tells me to "keep our Airmen in line, deliver everything the combat commanders want anywhere and anytime, and—most of all—don't piss off the Kuwaitis."

I move my schedule around and fly Monday night instead. It's a standard troop haul to Baghdad International. Standard in that we've done a lot of these over the last five years. Non-standard in that back home we aren't concerned about an errant surface-to-air missile or small arms fire on our arrival. I've got an instructor with me for my first flight in theater, and she signs me off as "good to go" when we return to Kuwait. Sure, I was going to have to screw up pretty badly for the captain to tell the wing commander he needed another qualification flight, but I recognize the flight went well. Training works—and I've spent the last three months re-qualifying in the C-130 I started flying as a first lieutenant.

Pete Quindlen joins me on the drive for dinner at General Ahmad's in the desert on Thursday night. We leave the base at five and it takes us an hour to follow the general's directions. One of our security force's teams follows us. No matter how secure we believe we are in this country, I'd have my ass handed to me if my boss found out my deputy and I left the base at the same time to drive off into the Kuwaiti desert. When we arrive, I'm surprised at the set-up.

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

I knew we would be outside because General Ahmad told us we should bring us a jacket. He didn't tell us we would be eating in tents.

The general greets us with kisses and whispers in my ear, "You can greet my brothers how you feel comfortable. A handshake is okay. They will not be offended."

Pete and I move through the men as General Ahmad does introductions. As I shake hands with the last man, the general says, "Now you have met twenty-one of my twenty-two brothers. Khaled could not make it tonight. Welcome to my family."

My jaw drops and I glance at Pete. He appears as impressed as I am.

"Sounds like your mother is an incredible woman," I say.

The general laughs, to my relief. I've just ignored my training on cultural sensitivity with my question.

"Four mothers. My father had four wives."

General Ahmad ushers Pete and me into the main tent and has us sit to his side by a small fire. We drink tea and talk. We drink more tea and talk some more. Three hours later, and an equal number of bathroom breaks, we are still drinking tea. I'm wondering what the plan is for dinner. Finally, at 11 o'clock, two trucks show up and back toward the side of the tents. Men lay down plastic wrap and distribute large dishes of food across the tent floor. The aroma of eastern spices has my mouth watering.

The meal is incredible. Multiple rice dishes, bread, hummus, all encircling the body of a goat. We reach from our cross-legged positions and scoop the meat into our mouths with our hand, then squeeze rice balls with our grease-laden fingers to follow the goat meat. A challenge for Pete and I, as we studiously avoid using our left hand to help pack our bites together. I knew when we accepted the invitation that alcohol wouldn't be an option, but I can't help thinking I'm

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

experiencing the Kuwaiti version of an American tailgate party—a loud, man-dominated, bro-fest minus booze and a corn hole game.

General Ahmad graciously ensures our security team, positioned in the parking lot, is also provided food. Men arrive to pull up the plastic wrap and dispose of the leftovers. I love this experience. A taste of the “real” Kuwait I suspect most don’t get. But it’s past ten and we’ve got work tomorrow. General Ahmad pulls me back to the fire and offers coffee. We sit for two more hours talking about family and nibbling on dates and knafeh.

“What did you think?” Pete asks on the way home.

“Totally different experience than I expected,” I say. “But I’m kind of glad it’s over. By the time we get back to base, we’ll have been gone for eight hours.”

Pete laughs.

“What?” I ask.

“General Ahmad told me they do this every Thursday. And you’re invited every time.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“I shit you not.” Pete waits a couple of seconds before continuing. “He did say the last commander would sometimes send his vice commander in his place if his schedule didn’t allow him to make a week. I debated on whether to share that with you.”

“Asshole. Every other week then, OK?”

“Yes, Sir.”

###

I recognize the importance of host nation relations. This is the part of the job I had most dreaded upon arrival. It’s not that I can’t talk to people or am uninterested in other cultures. I simply prefer doing things more than socializing. Even at a stateside assignment, a cocktail party

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

is torture. A middle-of-the-night low-level flight over Northern Arkansas culminating in an airdrop is what rocks my boat.

General Ahmad seems to recognize my issues. Likely, it's something he's observed in previous commanders as well. Throughout the year, we become closer—breaking bread every other Thursday, Tuesday morning tea on base, and brief stops to say hello on the American portion of his base. When the US pushes for the deployment of C-17s to the Kuwaiti base, General Ahmad and I work closely to build an operational plan for bedding down and employing the strategic airlifter. There are plenty of politics involved, but the relationship that General Ahmad and I have forged is strong. My bosses are impressed. Only Pete and I know the real truth. Our Kuwaiti general is way better at this relationship building thing than we are.

In the spring, General Ahmad takes me fishing. He's already had Pete out twice and has been urging me to join him. We motor out of the harbor on a blistering hot morning and into the placid Kuwait Bay, where he shows me how to rig his poles. Luck evades us for the first hour. General Ahmad brings in his line and I move to do the same.

“Keep fishing, Cam. I must pray.”

For the next ten minutes, I watch my line while periodically glancing at the general's prone figure facing back toward the harbor. When he finishes, he rigs his line again and we continue our fruitless pursuit of the fish he's been bragging about.

“Is it awkward for you when I pray?” the general asks.

This is a first. We've talked about a lot of things this year, but religion is not one of them. “No. I pray too. I'm a Christian. I just don't do it the same way.” I smile. “Or near as often as you do.”

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens

General Ahmad grins. “I knew you were a Christian. This is one of the reasons I like you so much.”

“General, I hope this doesn’t come out the wrong way, but I’ve never heard a Muslim say what you just said—that they like a foreigner because they are Christian.”

The general’s pole bends and my eyes widen before I realize he’s just bringing in his line a bit. “Okay, you might be right. Most Muslims wouldn’t put it the way I did. But I will tell you something. Almost any Muslim will tell you that if they are going to choose one of two people for a friend, and one is Christian, and the other is a non-believer, they will choose the Christian every time.”

I turn my head to General Ahmad. I think I know the answer to his question, but I hadn’t put it together before today. This man who has opened up his base and his family to me is a man acting how I think a Christian should act. He loves God with all his heart. He’s been loving me—his neighbor—as well. But it’s not a Christian thing. It’s a God thing.

“Do you know why?” the general asks.

I do. But I want to hear him say it. “Why?”

“Because even though I believe many parts of your religion are not accurate—which I’m sure is how you also feel about my religion—we both believe in the same God. And we feel that we can trust someone more if they believe in a greater power, if they have faith in that God. Because then we can expect them to act with grace.”

And there it is. My mentor teaching me a final lesson on a fishing boat in Kuwait Bay.

We sit for another half hour without even a bite. I debate whether I should make a joke about feeding a man a fish vice teaching a man to fish, but decide against it.

Everything has already been said.

Grace on the Gulf Cam Torrens