

## **THE GENERAL'S GARDEN**

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Arriving at Camp Taji in October 2016 - two weeks after the battle of Mosul had begun - marked the beginning of my deployment in Iraq as the official war artist commissioned by the Australian War Memorial Museum and the Australian Defence Force.

Mosul, once a centre of ancient cultures and trade, had been sealed off from the world when hundreds of jihadi stormed the city in June 2014 forcing the Iraqi soldiers and civilians to retreat. The battle to retake the city in 2016 brought together as many as 50,000 Iraq and Kurdish troops, and 5000 US-led international coalition partners, determined to liberate Mosul from the clutches of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi who had declared the city the hub of his so-called caliphate.

This was the context in which I was to make a film-based work in Camp Taji, a training compound just north of Baghdad where the Australian, American and other allied troops were stationed.

Originally, Taji had been established during the Saddam Hussein's era. Then it was renowned as the largest and most advanced military base in the country - focused on tank maintenance and artillery repair. In December 1998, American forces began bombing Iraq: Operation Desert Fox as it was called, was an intense four-day bombing campaign that destroyed much of Iraq's military infrastructure, including Taji. Five years later, in 2003, Saddam Hussein lost control of the base when the US forces unleashed a second air attack - a devastating raid that ultimately led to the overthrow and death of the Iraqi leader.

By the time I arrived, Camp Taji had become a secure base with the Coalition forces occupying what was known as the 'Green Zone' - an area encircled by the Iraqi Camp, the 'Amber Zone', the base of the new Iraqi army and National Guard. While it was a facility where Coalition personnel would train and educate Iraqi soldiers, during my time at Taji the focus for all troops was the defeat of ISIL and, first and foremost, a coordinated approach to the retaking of Mosul.

Given the limited time available to me at Taji, I decided to focus on a diary of sorts, a film that would encapsulate the daily lives of the Australian, New Zealand and Iraqi soldiers amongst whom I had been embedded. One immediate observation was the division I observed between the Coalition and the Iraqi soldiers... especially the large gate that prevented the Iraqi soldiers from entering the Coalition compound. There was always a cloud of suspicion and caution over the camp.

At all times, non-combatative personnel like me were accompanied by at least four armed soldiers who not only monitored all activities but were provided to ensure our protection. Such was the precarious nature of everyday existence: body armour was compulsory... even within certain predetermined 'safe' destinations despite the ever-present bodyguards. Always a sense of pending danger - a pervasive ambivalence, the possibility of interlopers and betrayal.

I was not the only non-combatant fascinated and bemused by the predicament. A journalist/soldier in Taji at the same time introduced me to the Commanders of both the Australian and New Zealand troops with whom he had established a certain rapport. He was also able to get access for me to enter the Amber Zone: there I was permitted to film in the Prayer Room and, amazingly, through his influence, I was able secure an invitation to visit the Iraqi Commander-in-Chief's garden - perhaps, I imagined, a place of solace he had established for himself at his headquarters within the Iraqi camp.



One of the Australian colonels told me that the General couldn't imagine surviving such a hostile environment without signs of life around him. A lasting memory of my visit to the garden with its fenced enclosure housing a brood of chickens and a turkey, is the hundreds of birds circling above in the evening air.



The visit to what I now call 'The General's Garden' coincided with what was to be my last night in Iraq. It was twilight when our drive to the Amber Zone began: with hindsight, it was an expedition between two worlds. I now understand the privilege associated with being granted access to this metaphorically potent place. The General's quarters, his garden and the Prayer Room, ignited the imaginative potential I was seeking for my project. Looking back at the footage, the garden bathed in soft evening light possessed the quietude one could easily associate with any backyard in a suburban world... the freshly-mown lawn, the chicken coop, the twittering birds and, believe it or not, a swing seat! It was as if time had stopped; that this was not in the middle of a war zone but in the garden of some well-kept home.



Australian and New Zealand colonels also told me that the time they spent with the General in his garden headquarters was the safest they had felt at Camp Taji - a haven in the midst of what can only be described as a bland, dusty and desperate, tough macho-militaristic landscape. While the secluded but lively, life-affirming garden suggested a place of refuge, it could equally be considered a powerful statement of resistance and resilience - an individual's response, a reminder of an essential sense of being. With its trees and birds, it was like an oasis - a way of enduring life in an extreme and precarious environment. But it also troubled me: in stark contrast with the devastation of life in Iraq, the General's retreat represented privilege and entitlement - a 'staged' space far removed from the hard cold reality faced everyday by civilians bearing the brunt of an endless war. Initially when asked by the Australian soldiers what I would be filming at the base during my ten days of deployment, I said that my focus would be the circumstances of daily life... what soldiers on both sides of the camp had to deal with being away from home, from family and loved ones in a fractured, war-torn country. In this light, the garden within what could best be described as man-made bleakness made the General's attempt at humanising his headquarters both surreal and Disneyesque.



If this site of refuge and contemplation had become the preferred meeting place for the Coalition colonels and commanders because of its discrete and strategic location away from the bustling camp, then the 'surreality' of the garden was even further reinforced by the existence of a monstrous surveillance balloon suspended high above the camp. Of such an imposing scale, this ever-watchful blimp was an invasive and insidious presence that diminished any lightness or hope associated with the flocks of migrating birds swooping and dipping in the twilight sky. While an incredible image of freedom and flight, it became

impossible to bear when one considered the hopelessness and despair of millions of displaced people in the world today... forced to escape and with no choice but to migrate from their homelands because of invasion and the atrocities of war.



Standing in this 'in between space' - two worlds separated by protocols and a large gate - to this day remains palpable. Media floods us with footage of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers - the collateral damage of endless wars - their despair and poverty, their subjugation by either occupying forces or by entrenched authoritarian regimes.

I was not the only one who was touched by these two contrasting worlds within the confines of this camp. The Iraqi-born translator who accompanied the journalist and me on the journey to the garden had left as an exile in the 1990s and had become an American citizen, returning to his country with the Coalition forces to assist with the training of Iraqi soldiers and their quest to conquer ISIL. He seemed displaced: trapped here in nowhere land between two cultures - an 'American' in Iraq acting as a key translator and mediator. As we left the Amber Zone that night, perhaps the three of us were silently pondering the ambiguous nature of the General's garden. Usually gardens suggest an harmonious extension of nature but on reflection this secluded and blooming enclave seemed far too fragile... a mere mirage within a dull grey cruel world.