

# Four Days in an Iraqi Parking Lot

Bill Nelson

*In May 1991, a specially selected team, under the auspices of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was assembled for the first inspection of Iraqi nuclear capabilities. Laboratory engineer Nelson was a member of that team.*

I was an original member and Senior Scientific Advisor for the AEC (now DOE) Nuclear Emergency Search Team (NEST) that has responded to various nuclear emergency incidents over the years. After the Persian Gulf War, two of us from Lawrence Livermore (me and George Anzelon) were part of the first international team that went to Iraq to perform inspections under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 687, which directed that the Iraqis give up anything that had to do with long-range missiles or weapons of mass destruction.

It all happened rather quickly. I was in a meeting at Los Alamos on a Wednesday in May 1991, when I got a call at 6:00 in the evening from DOE headquarters saying that they wanted me to be in Vienna the following Sunday. I drove about 100 miles an hour down to Albuquerque and caught the last airplane out of town. Back in Livermore, I called the International Atomic Energy Agency to find out what they needed us to bring, because the UN has little funding for modern equipment. I later went to the local Good Guys store and spent \$3,500 just on camera equipment. It turned out to be a good move, because our cameras provided most of the good photographs that were obtained.

We left Vienna on the following Tuesday on a chartered Romanian aircraft. After stopping in Romania and Cyprus, we flew into Kuwait City about noon. You could barely see the sun at that time because the oil-well fires were still burning. It was like arriving at night. We then flew to a former British RAF base at Habanyah, which is about 80 kilometers west of Baghdad. Iraqi security personnel met us when we deplaned and put us in a bus, which departed in an easterly direction. We figured we were heading to Baghdad, but we didn't know what they planned to do with us. As we neared Baghdad, it was getting dark, and flares were being launched near the road on which we were traveling.

All of a sudden, the bus blew a tire. The driver got out and tried to change the tire, but he was obviously having a hard time with it. He had been trying to fix it for

a long time when a whole bunch of vans pulled up. They divided us up, put us in the vans, and headed off in the dark.

By this time, I was wondering if they were taking us to the pokey. One of the drivers flashed his lights behind the van that George and I were in and went off in some other direction. But our fears were unfounded, and we all ended up at the Palestinian Hotel in Baghdad. At least for the first night, we knew that we were okay.

The next day, a small group of us was allowed to go down to their nuclear laboratory, which is called Tuwaitha, about 60 kilometers south of Baghdad. It is about the size of Lawrence Livermore but is surrounded by 100-foot-high earthen berms and 300-foot-high towers with rings of cables that they built to prevent low-altitude aircraft attack. We went in under escort and tried to determine what we needed to do for our inspection. The bombing had been over for around four months by this time, so they had quite a while to “deconstruct” the facilities that had been in the laboratory. There was quite a bit of rubble and badly damaged buildings, but it looked like there had been a construction site there. We found a lot of evidence that they had been changing things, which we called “deconstruction.”

We spent more than a week going through all this rubble, trying to find out what they had been doing and whether they left any evidence that would tell us what had been going on in the facility. We did locate, after the Iraqis showed us where they had hidden it, their supply of enriched uranium reactor fuel that had been given to them by Russia and France. After a thorough search, we had not found evidence of any activities related to nuclear



Members of the UN inspection team wait for their release in a parking lot in Iraq.



When they discovered the Iraqis were moving equipment under their noses, some UN inspectors sought better vantage points to track their movements.

weapon development. However, there were things that we couldn't and they wouldn't explain.

When we got back to Vienna, some of the IAEA people said, "Well, we didn't find anything, so there is no evidence that they were pursuing nuclear weapons." But those of us that were more cynical said, "Look, there are things here that they haven't explained. Obviously, something was going on, so we had better wait and see what the next inspection team finds."

As it turned out, on the day we left, overhead photography showed them digging up giant pieces of hardware that had been buried outside the earthen berm, which they then moved around the country on tank transporters, trying to keep them from being seen. Eventually, the second inspection team found the equipment and was able to establish that it was to be used to produce enriched uranium by the electromagnetic isotope separation (EMIS) process—the same process invented by Ernest Lawrence and used at Oak Ridge for the Manhattan Project. In one of their libraries, I later found copies of his patents that had been issued in 1966 after the process had been declassified.

Overall, we found a lot of hardware related to enriching uranium, but most of the facilities that they had designed for their nuclear weapons development program (which they called "Petrochemical Program #3") were blown up during the bombing. But the knowledge was still there. We found one big room where the walls were standing and the roof was intact, but there was rubble all over the floor. If you looked under the rubble, there was a dirt floor where there had been concrete. They had taken out whatever was there and put rubble back over it. There were other places where they'd dug things up and buried them. We saw signs of a reinforced concrete structure protruding into the bottom of a bomb crater that they would not explain. Also, on the first day that we went to Tuwaita there were piles of paper smoking outside of various buildings where they had gone through and pulled things

out—maybe the last papers they could find—and burned them right there. It was, almost literally, a smoking gun.

On another trip in September 1991, a team was organized to look for paper documentation instead of hardware or facilities. I (along with Cal Wood) went on that trip. I needed to know what the hazards might be on this kind of mission before I could send other Laboratory people to participate. We ended up being held up in a parking lot for four days on this mission because we had boxes of information that the Iraqis didn't want us to take away.

The UN went public with the fact that we were being detained. At about 3:00 a.m. on our second night in the parking lot, we received a call from what was said to be a San Francisco news organization. The team leader looked at me and said, "Well, you're from there, why don't you talk to them?" Up until then, nobody knew that we were involved—the Lab certainly wasn't telling anybody. I spoke with the television station that had called, and they asked me to call back in an hour and talk on their evening news program. The station then called the Lab with the news that I was going to be on television and asked for a picture of me, which was denied. My office was very surprised at this news, because our presence in Iraq was being treated as highly confidential, and doubted that it was real. However, they notified my family that I might be talking on television. All of this was possible because we had a satellite telephone using the Inmarsat communication system with us in the parking lot. I talked to that television station three nights in a row on the 6 o'clock news (which was at 4:00 a.m. in Baghdad). This was a surprise to both my family and the Laboratory. I did have an opportunity to talk directly with my family via Inmarsat after the public interviews started, which proved to be of great help in reassuring them that I was safe.

The last morning that we were stuck in the parking lot provided one of the few humorous incidents of the trip. It was the fourth day, and by then, the UN Security Council had voted unanimously to condemn Iraq. This vote included Cuba and the USSR, who were the last UN supporters that Iraq had, so they decided to give in. They came up with a face-saving procedure wherein they would let us have the documents if we would inventory exactly what was contained therein.

While the final details were being negotiated allowing our departure from the parking lot, I was holding on the satellite phone to the TV station (at a cost of \$10 per minute to the UN). There was a bad fire somewhere in California, so we were no longer first on the news list. I kept telling the producer (who screens and schedules their input) "Hurry—I may have to leave. I may have to unplug any minute!" "Roger," he kept saying, "We'll have you on in a minute." Finally, I said, "I have to go—we're getting out!" and I hung up. They had the first word in the world that we were out of the parking lot, but their producer never figured it out. So much for real-time news!