

# A Quaker Salute to Soldiers in Nasiriyah

By Richard McCutcheon

There is a town about 375 kilometers south of Baghdad called Nasiriyah. My wife, Tamara, and I came to love it while we lived in Iraq, and traveled there several times. Those familiar with the Bible may know it by its biblical name, Ur, the place where Abraham is said to have lived for about 65 years. Someday, when times are different, we have talked about going back to live in Nasiriyah. Just to live. Just to be with the people there. To get acquainted, perhaps, with the works of Haboobi, the patron poet of the city, whose statue stands in the centre of the round-about in the heart of the town.

Nasiriyah is located on the banks of the Euphrates river. The Al-Janoob Hotel, where we stayed whenever we visited Nasiriyah, is on the road that runs along the river. When you exit the front door of the hotel, walk across the road, and pass through a small park not more than ten meters across, you come to a paved promenade with a low wall running along the river bank. It is a short hop over the wall and down to the water's edge. It's truly a beautiful spot—I see it in my mind's eye at this very moment, as I sit at my desk writing.

One morning, I woke up quite early. Sleep wouldn't come to me, so I thought I might as well get up. I happen to be an avid amateur photographer. The idea—perhaps rooted in some romantic notion of the Euphrates—came to me to go down to the water's edge in the early pre-dawn light and take a picture of the river. I knew that this was not something that I was supposed to do—that is, to go out on my own—especially in a southern town known for its anti-government tendencies. In retrospect, I might have got the government official who traveled with us, not to mention Tamara and me, into trouble. But I went ahead and got dressed, slung my Nikon camera over my shoulder, and headed for the river.

It was magical. Everything that I had imagined it would be—even more. Clambering over the low wall, kneeling down at the water's edge, with river bank growth around me, I watched the river as dawn broke. The river, slow, gentle and majestic at this point, slid by quietly. Mist, rising from the water as the air began

to warm, cast everything in soft ethereal light. Soft light, what photographers sometimes call sweet-light. I crouched by the water's edge and snapped a few pictures of the mist-shrouded river. The sun breaking the horizon chased tendrils of mist across the water. Silence enveloped me.

After a short time, I sat down on the promenade wall to watch the river come to life in the morning light. At some point, a rhythmic beat of feet hitting the promenade pavement intruded on my silent reverie. I looked to my right, and saw a group of soldiers out on their regular morning exercise coming towards me. It's hard to capture the many thoughts that coursed through me over the next few minutes. Here I was, an unaccompanied foreigner with a camera and no documents in my pocket, no command of Arabic, in a politically sensitive part of the country, with a platoon of soldiers heading in my direction! I experienced anxiety, if not fear. Should I hide the camera under my shirt? Should I head immediately for the hotel? Clear in my memory is the worry I experienced about getting people into trouble because of the possibly silly notion of getting a picture of the famous Euphrates in the famous city of Ur. As I cast about in my mind for a way out, the group of soldiers advanced along the promenade. My mind worked slower than they marched, and before I had time to do anything they were upon me. So, there I sat on the wall.

## THE ENTIRE GROUP BROKE FORMATION TO TURN AND WAVE AT ME

As they came abreast of me the young man in charge of the group, walking to the fore, barked a sharp command, and immediately behind me they snapped to a full stop in perfect unison. I quickly cast my eyes over the group. Really, they were quite young—I would guess most were in their mid- to late-teens. Their uniforms looked much as I imagine most soldiers' uniforms look. Dark green, these ones just a bit scruffy, perhaps from morning calisthenics. By then, I had stood up to turn towards the group, and for lack of any better course of action, I smiled.

The leader issued another order and, to my great surprise, the entire group wheeled about in formation and gave me a crisp salute! Being a Quaker, I was not quite sure of the appropriate response, so I rather weakly

raised my hand and gave a half-hearted wave, with a smile pasted on my face the whole while. Promptly, the leader gave a further command, and the group fell into order and continued their march down the promenade, leaving behind a bemused foreigner.

Slowly silence again descended on the river bank. The sound of their feet striking the pavement echoed ever so lightly on the mist-covered river. Then, in the midst of the morning silence, I started to catch a different sort of echo opening up in the space between us—the unmistakable sound of teenage boys starting to giggle. About twenty paces up the promenade, I watched as their giggles turned into thigh-slapping laughter. The entire group broke formation to turn and wave at me with huge smiles on their faces. I enthusiastically smiled and waved back. They re-formed and carried on their way—a bunch of boys sharing a good laugh at the expense of an unsuspecting foreigner.

A short while later, I went back to the hotel and slipped into bed to hold my wife for a while before getting up to start a new day.

This very special little story is one of the more precious memories of my time in Iraq. I thank those boys for their playfulness and their laughter. Now, a couple of years later, I imagine that they too tell this story about the foreigner whom they met on the promenade in Nasiriyah. I'm sure that they tell it with gusto to their wives, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents and friends. Tragically, these are the boys and the families that George W. Bush has the power to kill by the stroke of a pen. With this story, I salute them in friendship. □

*Richard McCutcheon and Tamara Fleming, both Members of Hamilton Monthly Meeting, were NGO Co-Field Representatives to Iraq, where they lived for about eight months of their twelve month assignment in 2000-2001.*

## Presente

By Jack Ross

The medieval Christian community consisted of both the living and the dead. It was common to dedicate a chapel or special altar to those who had died and to provide for prayers for them, which would be repeated over long periods. A custom having a similar intent has arisen among people supporting the victims of repression by anti-democratic Central American governments. Many of those people were victims of torture and mass murders carried out by soldiers and police who were trained by the U.S. School of the Americas (SOA). Some 60,000 of them were trained to do these horrid things over a period of fifty years. Each year, protesters gather at the SOA, which has now been renamed with a euphemism, to commit civil disobedience against the SOA at Fort Benning, Georgia.

It has become the practice at Fort Benning and elsewhere to say or sing "presente," which in Spanish means, "He/she is here, she is among us, he is not forgotten." Often the deceased members of the communities are also remembered by inscription of the names on a small wooden cross carried by protesters.

In 1999, I participated in the protests at Fort

Benning. After the event, I wrote a long poem about it. It was only then that I remembered the commemorative cross that our daughter, Lisa, had placed in our garden. Here is a short poem, excerpted from the longer one, about that cross.

*Carlos Martinez. "Presente"*

*There was a small wooden cross  
in my garden  
for a man killed in war long ago*

*It was a small wooden cross  
with a common name in Spanish  
for a man killed in battle long ago*

*with U.S. funded arms  
and killers trained in Georgia  
he died in Nicaragua long ago*

*There was a small wooden cross  
in my garden for a man killed in battle  
I will remember him and sing "presente."*

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