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What Cats Know About War

By JOHN F. BURNS
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IT was a bitterly cold night in the Baghdad winter of 2005, somewhere in the predawn hours before the staccato of suicide bombs and mortars and gunfire that are the daily orchestration of the war. Alone in my office in The Times's compound beside the Tigris River, I was awaiting the telephoned "goodnight" from The Times foreign desk, eight time zones west, signaling that my work for the next day's paper was done.

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Andy Arkell

POISE A cat, having heard one huge suicide bomb go off, tends to take a second one in stride.

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Another War's Stray: An interview



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That is when I heard it: the cry of an abandoned kitten, somewhere out in the darkness, calling for its mother somewhere inside the compound. By an animal lover's anthropomorphic logic, those desperate calls, three nights running, had come to seem more than the appeal of a tiny creature doomed to a cold and lonely death. Deep in the winter night, they seemed like a dismal tocsin for all who suffer in a time of war.

With others working for The Times in Baghdad, I took solace in the battalion of cats that had found their way past the 12-foot-high concrete blast walls that guard our compound. With their survival instincts, the cats of our neighborhood learned in the first winter of the war that food and shelter and human kindness lay within the walls. Outside, among the garbage heaps and sinuous alleyways, human beings were struggling for their own survival, and a cat's life was likely to be meager, embattled and short.

Cat populations in the wild expand arithmetically with the supply of food, and ours multiplied rapidly, with as many as two or three litters at a time out in the shrubbery of our gardens, or beneath our water tanks.

Soon, our compound was home to as many as 60 cats at a time, their numbers carefully tallied by Younis and Saif, the enthusiastic young Iraqis who prepared heaped platters of rice and lamb and beef — and, as a special

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treat, cans of cat food trucked across the desert from Jordan, over highways synonymous with ambushes, kidnappings and bombings. As The Times's bureau chief, part of my routine was to ask, each night, how many cats we had seated for dinner. In a place where we could do little else to relieve the war's miseries, the tally became a measure of one small thing we could do to favor life over death. The American military command has a battery of "metrics" to gauge progress, and the nightly headcount of the cats became my personal measure, my mood varying as the numbers went up and down. Sometimes they went sharply down, during winter epidemics of cat flu, or after attacks by the compound's two dogs (war refugees themselves) that proved, as they grew beyond puppies, to have a feral antipathy to cats programmed in their bones.

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Joao Silva for The New York Times

NOBILITY Iraq's strays inherit land said to have given rise to all domestic cats.

Not everyone in the compound saw the burgeoning cat population so fondly. Some, including my wife, Jane, who works as the compound's chief administrator, loves cats as much as anyone, but thought matters had gotten out of hand when middle-of-the-night fights between the dominant males outside our building threatened to wake the devil, or when suppertime walks past the "cat motel" we built from a stack of water-bottle crates outside one of our kitchens turned into a pied-piper's epic, each step followed by dozens of hungry, impatient meowing creatures.

One control measure, having the cats spayed, was unavailable, since all of Baghdad's domestic-animal veterinarians seemed to have fled, among hundreds of thousands of other Iraqis who have sought sanctuary abroad. One attempt at neutering our female dog, Itchy, by a farm-animal vet, nearly killed her.

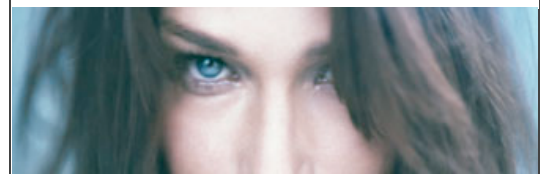
There were warnings, too, from the American military command, which imposed a ban, for American troops, on adopting stray animals, or feeding them. The Army's General Order No. 1, setting out rules of conduct, bans, at least in theory, the age-old military tradition of keeping animal mascots, other than bomb-sniffing dogs.

"They're cute, furry, and more dangerous than you think," one command bulletin this year said, speaking of cats and dogs. Maj. Robert A. Goodman, chief of veterinary services for the Army's 248th Medical Detachment, highlighted the rabies threat. "There's nothing compassionate about compassionate feeding," he said. "They're increasing the risk of disease."

Still, many troops in Afghanistan and [Iraq](#) ignore the ban.

Other bulletins from the American command have reviewed the ethics of feeding strays, saying that animal lovers among the troops do more harm than good when they accustom cats and dogs to a regular supply of food and affection — only to abandon them when they rotate home, leaving the animals depleted in their instinct to fend for themselves. At The Times's compound, too, we have never been certain how long we will remain in Iraq. But in my mind, at least, the benefits to the cats and our own morale outweighed the longer-term concerns, the more so because conditions beyond our walls seemed to offer scant prospects that most of them, denied our shelter, would survive for long anyway.

On that bitter night in 2005, I went a step further. Making my way to a veranda overlooking the spot where the kitten was crying, I "bombed" it with a feather duvet off

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an absent colleague's bed before it could scoot into an inaccessible recess in a garden wall. Thus did we acquire Scooter — white, with flecks of ginger and tabby, a female of extraordinary agility, who found a way, when still no bigger than the palm of my hand, to leap and claw her way out of a cardboard packing case five feet high.

Watching her, and the two litters of kittens she had over the following 18 months, offered we humans a new reaction to the cacophony of the war. The bloodiest suicide bombings, even miles away, have the sound and feel of the apocalypse, causing humans to freeze, no matter how often they experience it. Cats need to hear it only once. As they skitter to the safety of trees and bushes, they enter the blast and the tremor on the hard drive of their brains. On the next occasion, come the blast, they barely stir.

Mongrels though they are, our Baghdad cats, we learned from a recent study in the journal *Science*, have a noble lineage of their own — as inheritors of the same terrain occupied by the felines that were the forebears of all domestic cats, wild families that lived along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates more than 10,000 years ago.

But Scooter had her own ticket out of Iraq booked from the moment I clutched her in the duvet's folds. By August of this year, she had three 12-week-old kittens, each bearing the name of an American war machine — Apache (Patch, for short), Bradley and Stryker. The names were chosen, in part, in the hope that we might eventually find American veterans of the war, now home, to adopt them. We already have a cat in England, Scuzzie, who joined the family when he strayed into our home in New Delhi 13 summers ago to escape a monsoon, and he exhibits claws-out hostility to any other cat entering his domain.

Scooter and her kittens were fated to endure six months under rabies watch in a quarantine kennel in England, and it was shortly after her arrival there that we learned she was pregnant again. This has since raised the family in quarantine to seven.

But that lay ahead when I arrived at the Baghdad airport one recent summer day with the crate carrying the four cats. Getting them that far had been a saga, finding Iraqi health officials ready to issue and counterstamp fit-to-travel documents; negotiating the 12 hazardous miles to the airport through an obstacle course of checkpoints where soldiers and policemen have been trained to destroy on sight any “suspicious package”; and persuading wary airline personnel to clear the cat crate for loading.

The process took hours, and left me exhausted, sitting on the terminal's marble floor beside the cats, as the time for boarding approached.

All about was hubbub, with hundreds of angry, fearful Iraqis struggling to secure their own passage out. The cats seemed terrified, so I fell once more into my anthropomorphic mode, offering them a quiet discourse on what lay ahead — the 3,000-mile air journey, detention in the quarantine center and, ultimately, liberation into a green and pleasant land where they would be full citizens, never again wanting for shelter, warmth and food.

A small crowd of Iraqis had gathered, and one among them, a middle-aged man who introduced himself as a physician traveling to Jordan to see his ailing mother, knelt down beside me and asked, in halting English, if I'd mind a question. By all means, I said. “Well then,” he said, his face breaking into a sad smile, “what I want to ask is this: This proposal you make, is it for four legs only, or also for two? Six months' detention, British passport, free to stay, guaranteed home, this is excellent. I will take, and many other Iraqis, too.”