

War Crimes: The Ameriyah Shelter in West Baghdad: The 1991 St. Valentine's Day Massacre

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This article was originally published on February 13, 2007, in commemoration of the Ameriya Shelter bombing in Baghdad, Iraq.

It is sixteen years since the Ameriyah Shelter in west Baghdad was bombed, incinerating all but eight, inside. Figures for the souls lost, still vary from four hundred and five to over twelve hundred, the registration book was incinerated along with those who had sought refuge, women, children, students and on occasion, the very old. The men stayed out to make room for those whom they wished protection – and to rescue others from the ongoing carpet bombing. The Shelter was only used over night.

The shelter had been built to withstand a possible nuclear attack, during the eight year, western driven, Iran-Iraq war. Walls three metres thick with the roof reinforced by the near indestructable steel 'mesh' used to support four or six lane road bridges. The only vulnerable point was the ventilation shaft. Iraq had chosen a Finnish company to build shelters throughout Baghdad, selecting the company because of perceived Finnish neutrality and commercial integrity. The company, reportedly passed the plans to the US prior to the 1991 onslaught.

I visited the Shelter just months after the bombing. We were a group from various countries and arrived in the early, sparkling sunlight. So unscathed was the building from the outside, that we had not realised where we were, talking and laughing under a sky still painted with dawn's translucent trails and myriad shades of orange and ochre.



Iraqi reads holds a 1000 cranes peace offering at the Al-Amiriyah bomb shelter in Baghdad where 408 people died after two bombs destroyed it in 1991. Three days after the bombing the U.S. government apologized for bombing the shelter which protected families. (Photo by Paul Kitagaki Jr./Seattle Post-Intelligencer For News story by Larry Johnson)

Entering, there was a stunned silence. The smell of burning flesh still overwhelmed. I found myself tiptoeing through the blackened interior, under the melted piping, tiptoeing through the screams. There were sooted plastic flowers laid in dark corners, pathetic scraps of bloodied gauze. The only light was from the near perfect spherical entry point of the missiles, illuminating below, the great crater where they fell, the jagged remains of the centimetres thick steel mesh, hanging, a 'surgical strike' indeed, as a knife through butter – against women and children.

The Shelter, as during the Iran-Iraq war and in 1991, had been a safe haven in abnormal times. With electricity bombed, the huge generators allowed the children brief childhood normality: watching television, playing video games, reading, playing, homework – and the bombs could not be heard. The rows of bunk beds were a treat, with a rush to get the top bunk, a joyous eyrie of escape and escapism.

There were two vast floors, the top for sleeping, studying, socialising, sharing meals, the lower had showers, kitchens, a medical centre. When the bombs fell, the heat incinerated those on the top floor – and the vast water tank on the lower floor heated to bursting – boiling those showering, or chatting whilst cooking the evening meal, or those whose ailments were being treated and the medical staff.

The breast high 'scum' on the walls, was the flesh of those who perished. On the upper floor is the seared 'shadow' of a mother, holding her baby. Hiroshima revisited. I could bear the screams no longer and fled out and in to the sunlight. Noticing a small, blackened, brass plaque on the wall, I asked a Jordanian friend what it read. He struggled with the translation for a moment, the: 'It is like when there is a crisis and civilian people try to help ..' 'Civil Defence?' I asked : 'Yes, yes, it says Civil Defence Shelter No:24.'

America had, of course, claimed it was a Command Centre for Saddam Hussein's government. A lie, as ever, of enormity. Further, the U.S. had satellites watching everything (which continued through the embargo years, as now, clearly visible, blinking away like vast stars, floating, rotating.) A consistent comment over numerous interviews in the area and Baghdad, about the Shelter horror, that first visit and over subsequent years, was that for three days before, a satellite had been rotating over the district. Thus it would have recorded women and children entering it at dusk and leaving at dawn. That night there would have been a particular procession and it was the eve of the festival of Eid and with no means of cooking at home for the fast breaking, women took their food to prepare in the kitchens and their festive gifts, to wrap under the lights.

When the fire engines arrived, the rescuers could hear the screams, until they began to fade away – but the great metre thick steel door, with airline type handles to seal it from the inside for safety, was glowing like a furnace, then as it melted, re-sealed itself. Dante, revisited. To have poured water from gaping missile hole in the roof, would have subjected those inside to boiling steam. The fire chief, the toughest of men, who had seen the unimaginable and directed rescues over many years, faltered as he said, of the remains they finally brought out: 'We thought we were bringing out only children and wondered why they were there alone – then we realised the (adult) bodies had (contracted) to child size with the intensity of the heat.'

Anwar, then eighteen and a student ran to help, with a friend with whom he was staying, nearby. When talking of that night, he too faltered and stilled, then gestured with his hands, saying: 'The peoples, the bodies, they had gone so small – like this ..' There is a haunting tale told by Umm Rheda (mother of Rheda) who left the shelter temporarily to take some preparations home. Whilst she was away, the bombs fell her children were incinerated, with Rheda, her eldest daughter. When all the emergency services experts, the army which was drafted in, had failed to open the door, she begged and screamed to try. It opened: 'Rheda opened it for me', she says. The fire chief confirmed that Umm Rheda opened the door.

The Shelter, over time, became a shrine, the bereaved, visitors brought momentos, pictures of the dead, the babies, the mischevious, the young mothers, the earnest students, stared from the walls. The floor was cleaned and polished, but the skin, the shadows, the seared walls and the screams remained. Until 2003, this was a unique U.S. wickedness. Another was an early act of their invading troops : to storm it (with their boots on of course) and search this sacred, sobbing site, for weapons. And now courtesy again, of the U.S.A., all Iraq is Al Ameriyah.

Three days before the Shelter bombing, Dick Cheney, now Vice President and General Colin Powell (designated a 'dove' by the George W. Bush Administration) visited the US Air base at Khamis Mushat, Saudia Arabia (slogan: 'bombs are us' and 'we live so others may die.') After a pep talk to troops, they both signed two thousand pound bombs: 'To Saddam with fond regards', wrote Cheney ('*A General's War*', General Bernard Traynor and Michael Gordon, Little Brown, p.324.)

When the Shelter was bombed, frantic calls followed incase the bombs might have been involved in this massacre. Cheney's bomb apparently fell on northern Iraq, dropped by a Major Wes Wyrich. What souls Powell's decimated, is seemingly unknown.

The Ameriyah Shelter was bombed on the night of 13th/14th February: the celebration of Eid, St. Valentine's Day and the anniversary of the fire bombing of Dresden. When I put this

to a U.S. General and remarked on the 'coincidence', he looked me in the eye and said: 'Kinda neat, eh?'

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