

# THE STATESMAN

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**Cory Casalegno**

## WAHLID

By Cory Casalegno



I am a member of the Department of Defense civil service, currently serving with the U.S. Army's Communications-Electronics Command at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. In May of 2004 a call went out for volunteers to deploy to Iraq, and after much prayer and discussion I put myself forward with the full support of my dear wife, Annie. Annie and I both feel very strongly that what we are trying to achieve in Iraq, both for the Iraqi people and for ourselves, is worth fighting for. However, I don't think either of us realized how deeply the experience would affect both of us.

I deployed in mid-August and returned just before Christmas, having convoyed through the Sunni Triangle several times, been with the wounded in the Combat Support Hospitals, and hunkered down in the bunkers during many mortar/rocket attacks on our base. If called upon, I would volunteer again, in part because of my experiences with one individual in particular who will forever be an exemplar of public virtue for me...

Shortly after arriving at Camp Anaconda, sixty miles north of Baghdad and deep in the heart of the Sunni Triangle, I met a man named Wahlid. He was relatively wealthy, by Iraqi standards, and organized several of the larger construction

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projects on the base. He was well educated, spoke English fluently, and was very positive in all that he did. Over the course of several months I came to know him well as we worked together on several projects, showing each other pictures of our children and laughing at amusing stories that crossed the cultural divide. He had already been the subject of several assassination attempts, one of which killed his wife and one of his children.

In late September, I was driving him from one construction site on the base to another. It was hovering around 110 degrees and we were taking, on average, five to ten mortars or rockets per day, and so my thirty pounds of body armor and Kevlar helmet magnified the heat. As with all of the Iraqis, except the National Guardsmen, he wore none. While we bumped along the pock-marked road of the former Iraqi Airbase, with the hot wind from the deserts to the south swirling the fine dust of central Iraq through the cab, I asked him why he continued to work with us, considering the danger he was in. I knew he was getting ready to re-marry and still had his other children to raise. With his connections he could have made a good living working solely on Iraqi projects having nothing to do with the Coalition. His answer affected me deeply...

*"I want for my children what you have for yours. We have never had an opportunity like this to create a better life and I have to do what I can to help. How can I ask you to leave your wife, children, and America behind to come and help us if we will not help ourselves? Whether I die or not is Allah's will and not important. That these evil men are stopped and we become free is."*

Although Iraqis regularly told me that we, the coalition, must stay until they are able to defend themselves, I never heard it expressed so eloquently and succinctly. The most striking difference between what I expected and what I experienced in Iraq was the attitude of the Iraqi people. Headless Iraqi bodies were regularly dumped near our gates as warning to those who worked with us, many were killed by IED's and small arms fire as they drove the two hours

everyday to and from Baghdad, and thousands of Iraqi police and National Guard personnel have been assassinated – and yet they continue to risk everything to help us...help us to help them.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, my friend Wahlid, along with his brother, was killed at his home in Baghdad. The guards he had paid to keep his family safe deserted him, and when he answered his door assassins armed with AK-47's shot him several times. I lost a friend that day, and Iraq lost a patriot. Wahlid was just one man, but he was a man who knew that there are causes more important than self. In my mind he is an archetype of the majority of the Iraqi people – Shia, Sunni, and Kurd – who are not able to rotate back 'home' after their tour of duty is up, but must create the security and freedom in which they wish their children to live. I will tell my children again and again the story of Wahlid's courage and selflessness. I am grateful for your interest in his life and death, and hope that you will share his story widely so that as many people as possible may know the sacrifices that the Iraqi people are making for their freedom, and what public virtue truly is...

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**Wahlid**

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