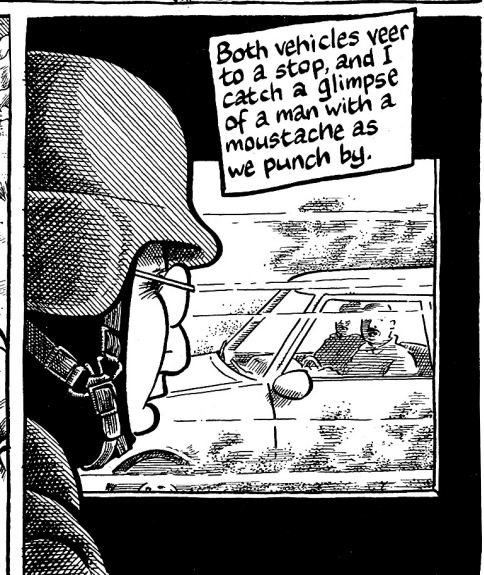
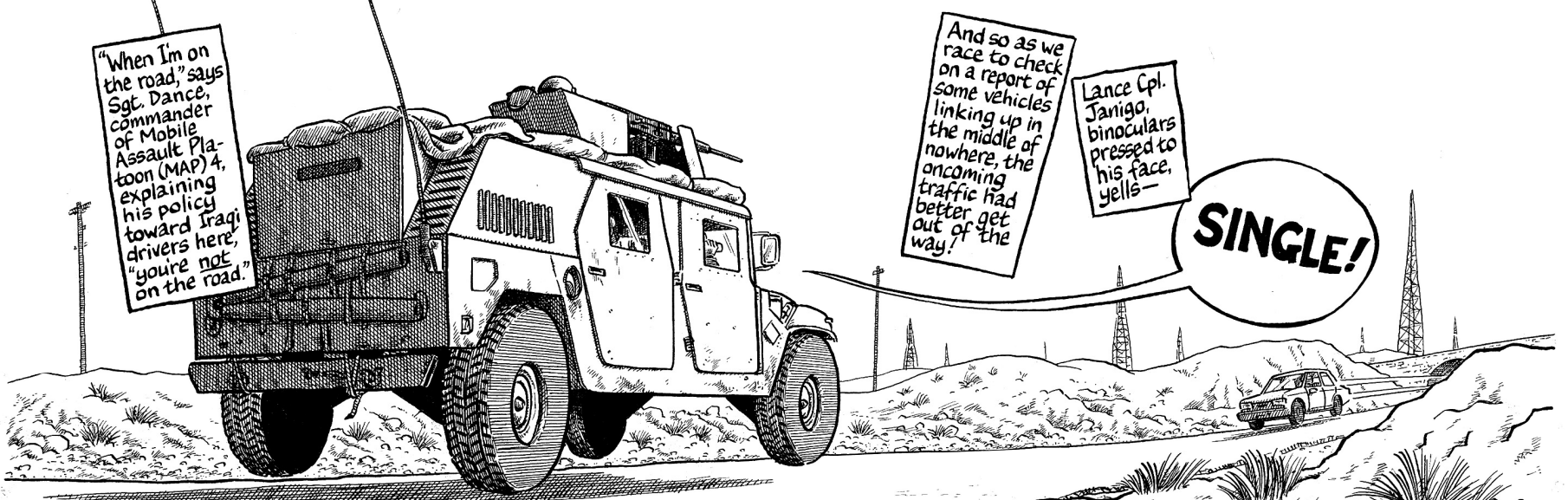


Joe Sacco, famed comic book writer, went on a mission to Iraq for Weekend. This is his story

COMPLACENCY KILLS

By Joe Sacco ©2005

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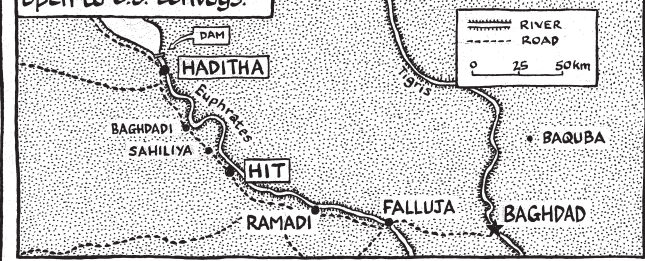
A few minutes later we reach the suspicious group of cars, which turns out to be a funeral procession.

"The bad guys don't usually congregate in vehicles on the side of the road," says Sgt. Dance, who was skeptical all along. "It's painfully obvious."

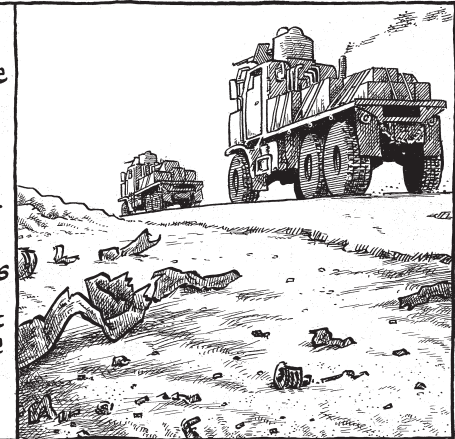
And to the bereaved he adds—

OUR SYMPATHIES ARE WITH YOU.

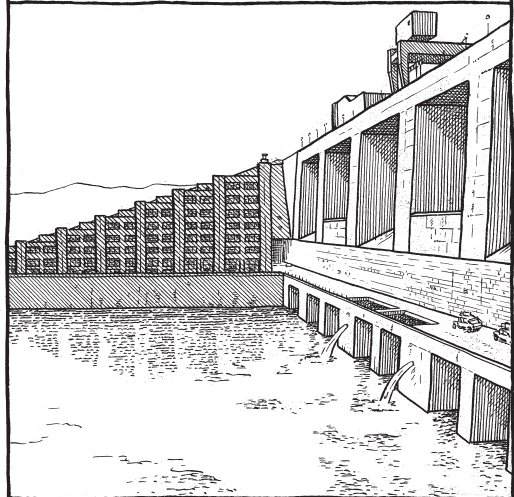
The primary mission of Sgt. Dance and the MAPs of the Weapons Company of the 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment is to keep the roads between Haditha and Hit open to U.S. convoys.



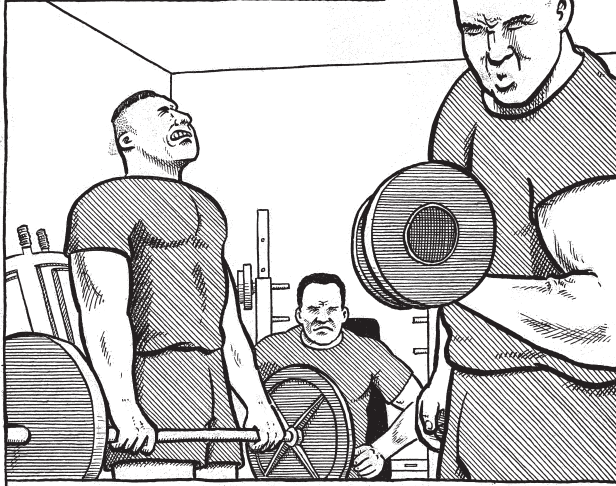
Their adversaries are insurgents whose chief weapons are roadside and vehicle-borne bombs and land mines. Twisted bits of car metal, charred patches of ground, and craters attest to the violence they've dished out to the Americans.



The Marines of the 1/23, who are nearly all Texan reservists, run most of their road patrols in this stretch of western Iraq, from the functioning ten-story high Haditha Dam on the Euphrates River.

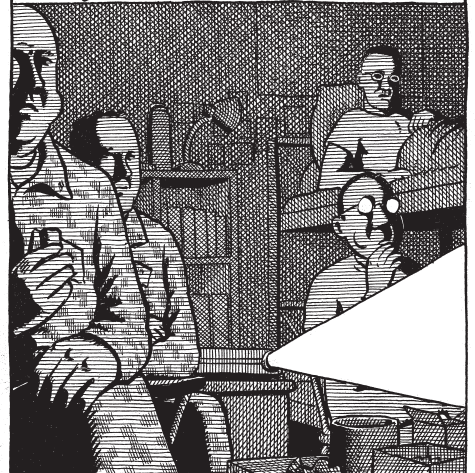


The stairwells reek of sulfur, but the Marines are otherwise smothered in home comforts: They enjoy a well-equipped weight room,

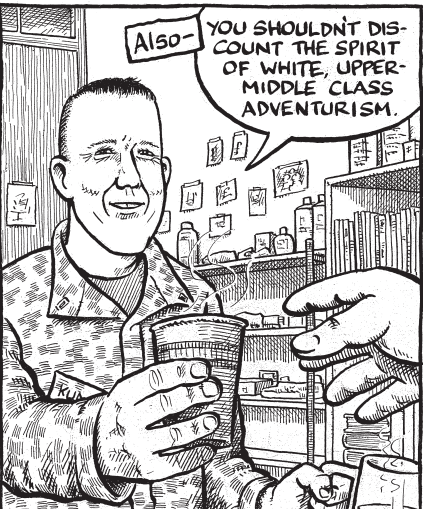


football on the chow hall's big-screen TV, and 24-hour internet connections to their wives and mothers.

I'm bunking on the fifth deck in a room full of officers where Lt. Crabtree, the battalion adjutant, projects a movie on the wall every night and dispenses snacks from an endless supply of pooled care packages.



The room's coffee aficionado is the commander of the engineering platoon, Capt. Kuniholm, and once I ask what motivated a married, liberal, business-owning Ph.D. student like himself to join the reserves knowing full well he would be sent to Iraq. A sense of duty, he answers.



Also— YOU SHOULDN'T DISCOUNT THE SPIRIT OF WHITE, UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS ADVENTURISM.

Almost discordantly in this cocooned world of X-Boxes and Maxim magazines, a sign on the second deck reminds the Marines of the MAPs heading down to their Humvees that—



J. SACCO I:05

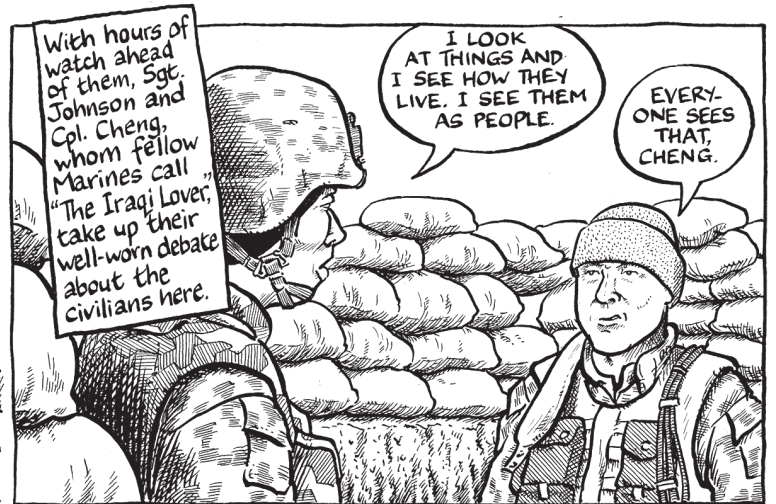
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Their job is to stay focused, to stay alert, and, from semi-hidden vantage points—like this one manned by Sgt. Johnson, commander of MAP 2, and Cpl. Cheng—to scrutinize any anomalous move an Iraqi motorist makes.

THE BIGGEST FIGHT IS TRYING TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHO'S THE ENEMY AND WHO ISN'T.

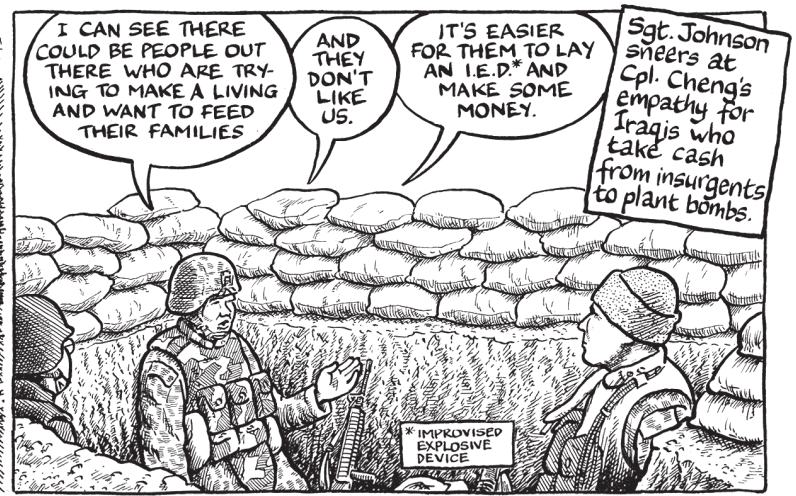
THEY BLEND IN SO WELL.



With hours of watch ahead of them, Sgt. Johnson and Cpl. Cheng, whom fellow Marines call "The Iraqi Lover," take up their well-worn debate about the civilians here.

I LOOK AT THINGS AND I SEE HOW THEY LIVE. I SEE THEM AS PEOPLE.

EVERYONE SEES THAT, CHENG.



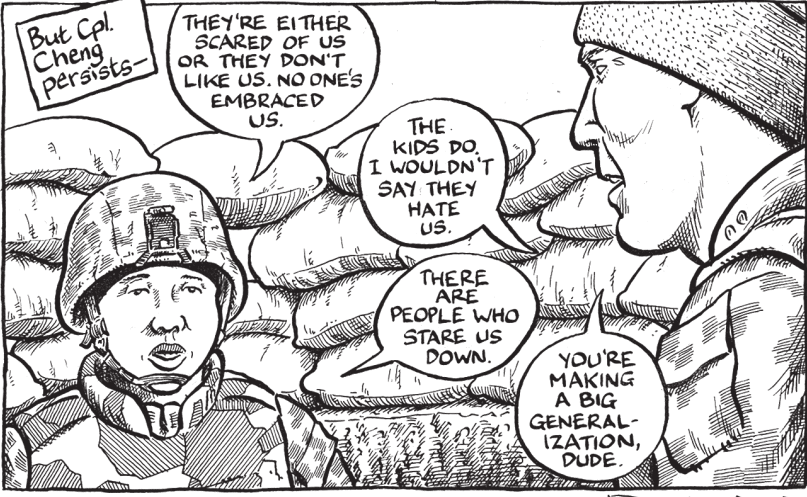
I CAN SEE THERE COULD BE PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO ARE TRYING TO MAKE A LIVING AND WANT TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES

AND THEY DON'T LIKE US.

IT'S EASIER FOR THEM TO LAY AN I.E.D.* AND MAKE SOME MONEY.

Sgt. Johnson sneers at Cpl. Cheng's empathy for Iraqis who take cash from insurgents to plant bombs.

* IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE



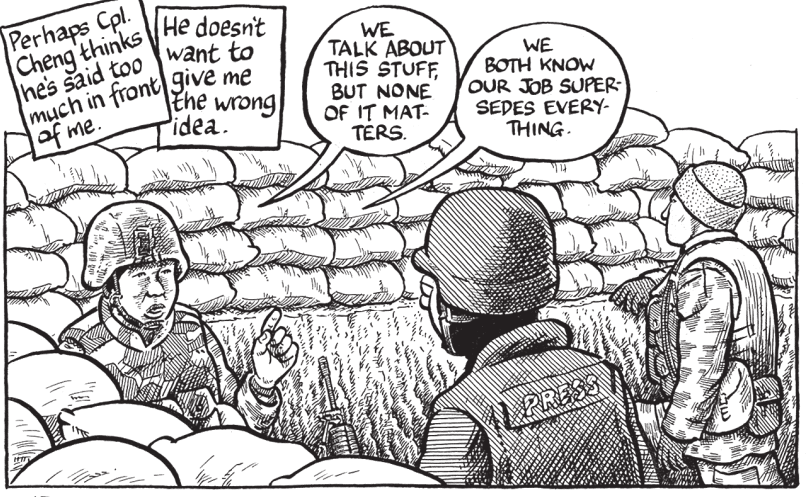
But Cpl. Cheng persists—

THEY'RE EITHER SCARED OF US OR THEY DON'T LIKE US. NO ONE'S EMBRACED US.

THE KIDS DO. I WOULDN'T SAY THEY HATE US.

THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO STARE US DOWN.

YOU'RE MAKING A BIG GENERALIZATION, DUDE.



Perhaps Cpl. Cheng thinks he's said too much in front of me.

He doesn't want to give me the wrong idea.

WE TALK ABOUT THIS STUFF, BUT NONE OF IT MATTERS.

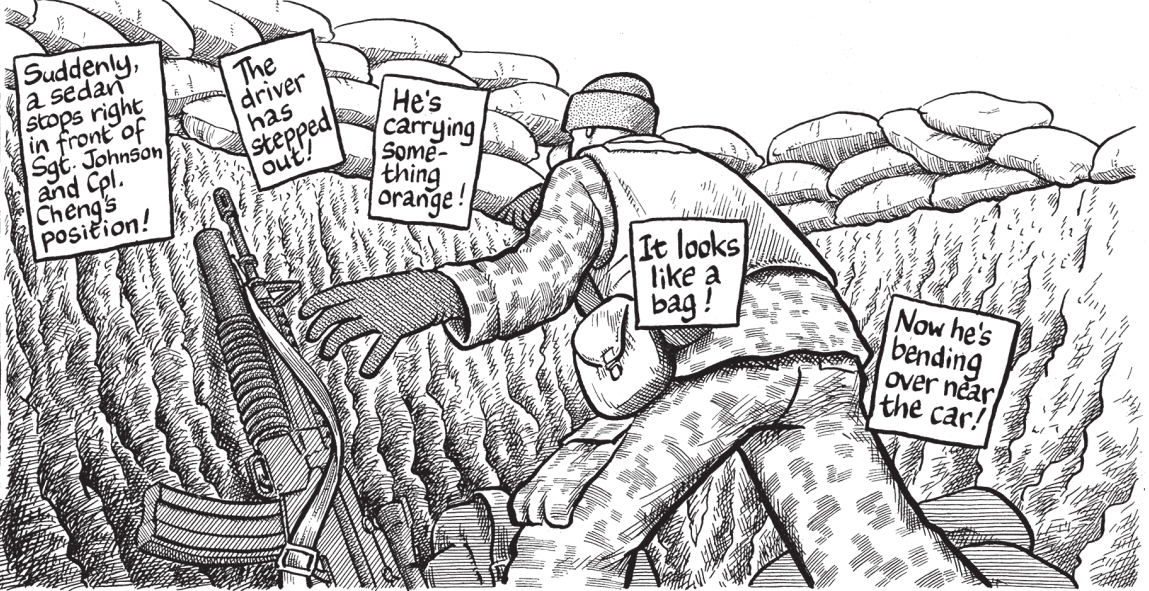
WE BOTH KNOW OUR JOB SUPERSEDES EVERYTHING.



And to Sgt. Johnson—

YOU'VE GOT TO STOP CALLING ME 'THE IRAQI LOVER.'

WE DO THAT JOKINGLY.



Suddenly, a sedan stops right in front of Sgt. Johnson and Cpl. Cheng's position!

The driver has stepped out!

He's carrying something orange!

It looks like a bag!

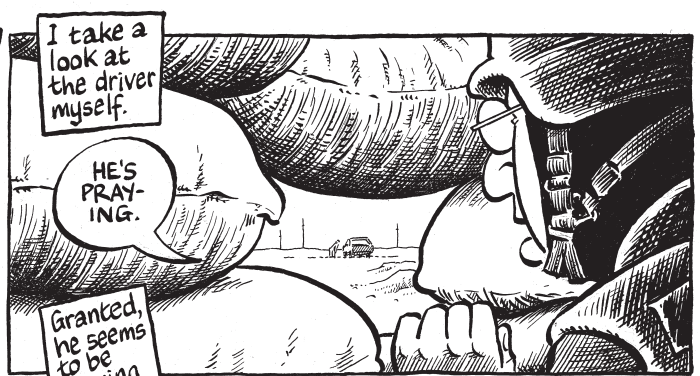
Now he's bending over near the car!

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Sgt. Johnson creeps toward the road keeping the Iraqi in his sights.

He wants a better view of what the driver is doing.



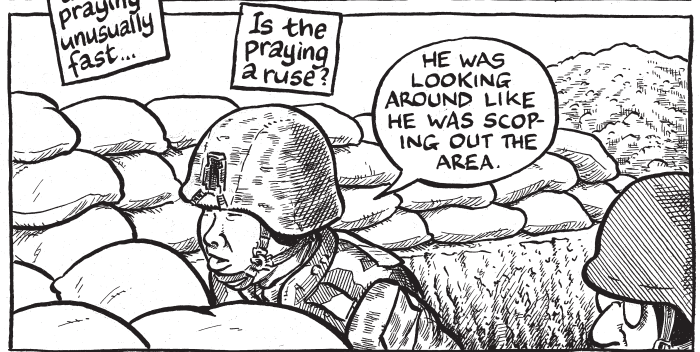
I take a look at the driver myself.

HE'S PRAYING.

Granted, he seems to be praying unusually fast...

Is the praying a ruse?

HE WAS LOOKING AROUND LIKE HE WAS SCOPING OUT THE AREA.

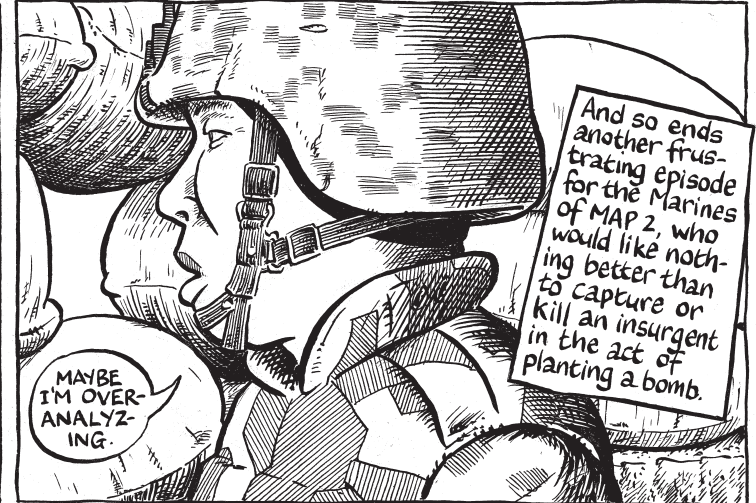


Minutes later, the driver leaves, but Col. Cheng's still suspicious.

The orange bag "could have been a prayer mat," he agrees—

—BUT I HAVEN'T SEEN TOO MANY PEOPLE GETTING OUT OF THEIR CARS TO PRAY.

MAYBE HE WAS CHECKING OUR REACTION, SEEING HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE FOR THE HUMVEES TO GET OVER HERE.



MAYBE I'M OVERANALYZING.

And so ends another frustrating episode for the Marines of MAP 2, who would like nothing better than to capture or kill an insurgent in the act of planting a bomb.



One of their platoon-mates, Cpl. Kolda, was killed four weeks ago when an abandoned car he was investigating blew up.

He was evacuated in this open-bed Humvee, called a highback, commanded by Sgt. Cantu.

I'D LIKE TO THINK HE DIED RIGHT AWAY.

THAT WOULD MAKE ME FEEL BETTER.

WE GAVE HIM C.P.R., BUT I THINK HE WAS ALREADY GONE.

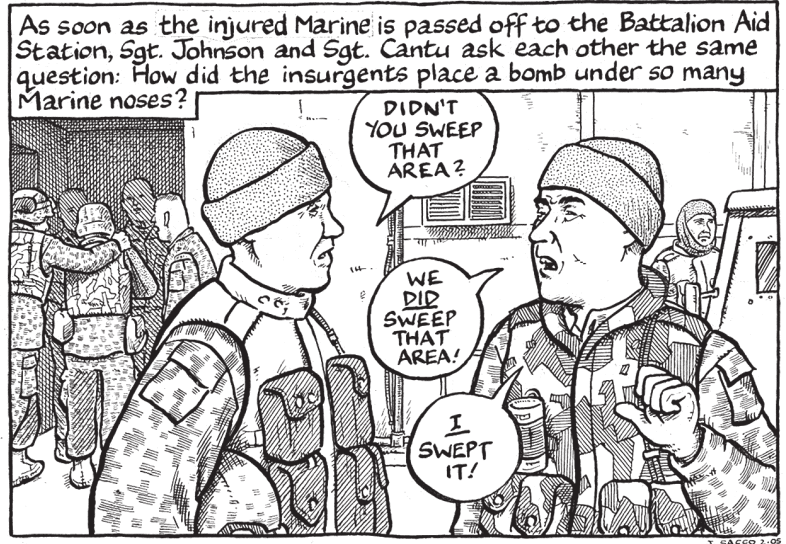
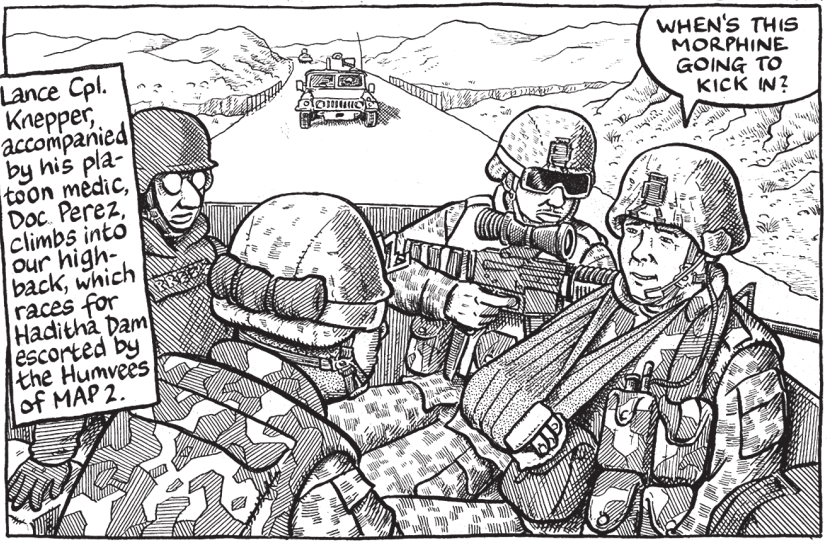
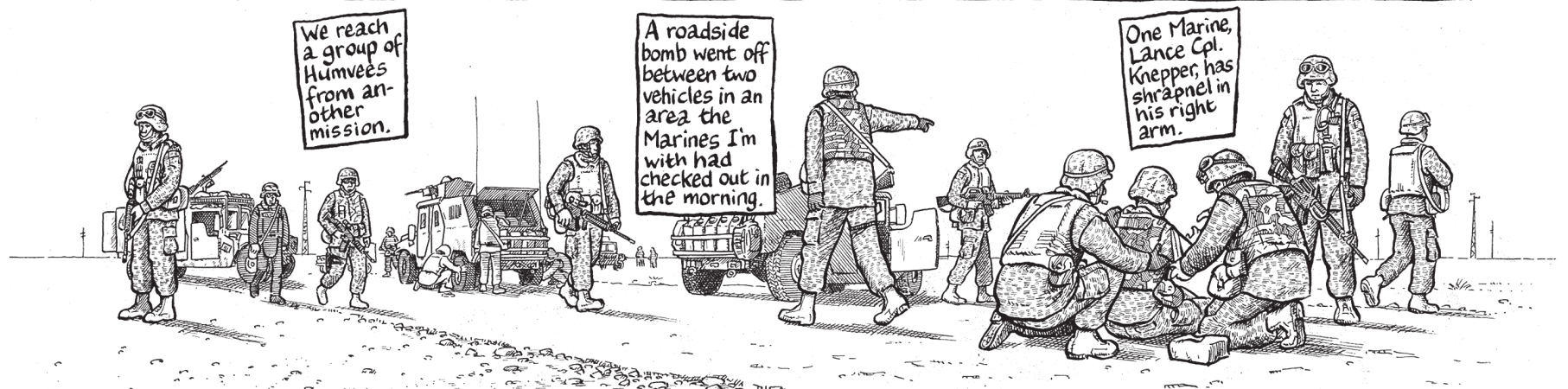
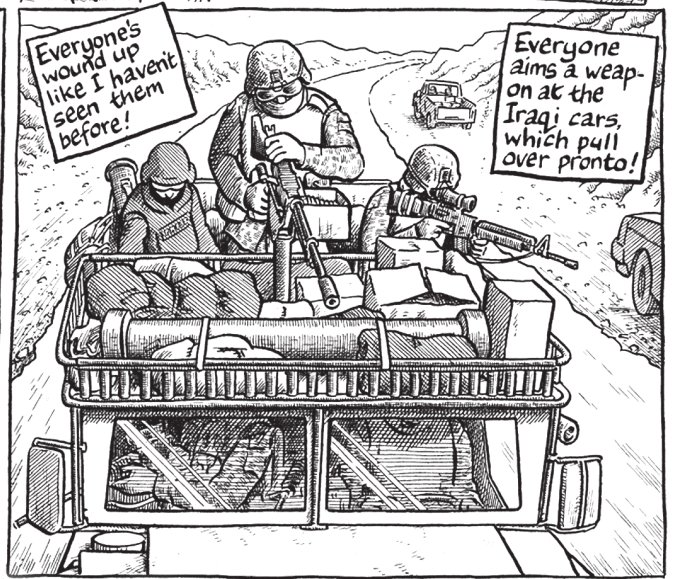
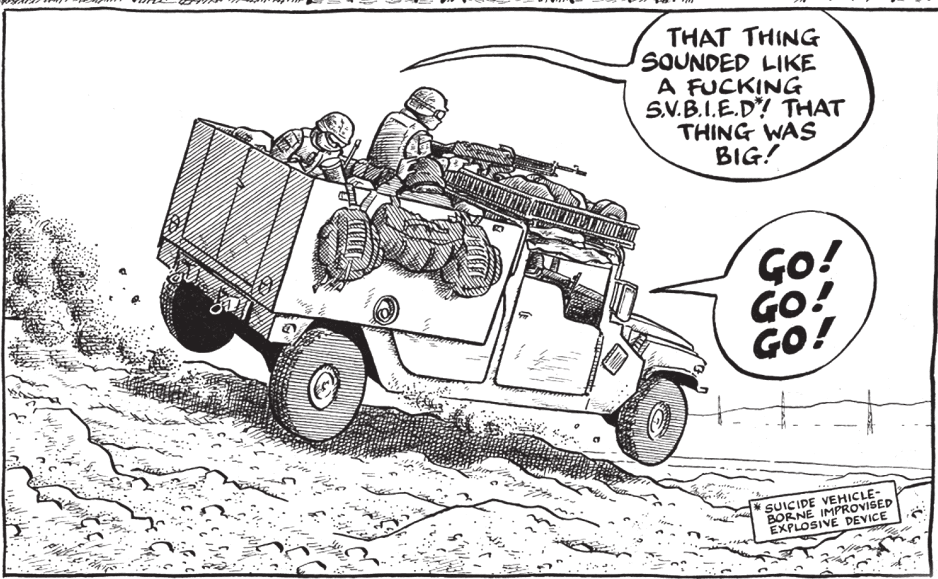


Two of Sgt. Cantu's crew bear the effects of near misses by suicide bombers.

Lance Cpl. Ledesma is slowly regaining his hearing after one blast;

driver Cpl. Heredia's ear was scarred by shrapnel from another.

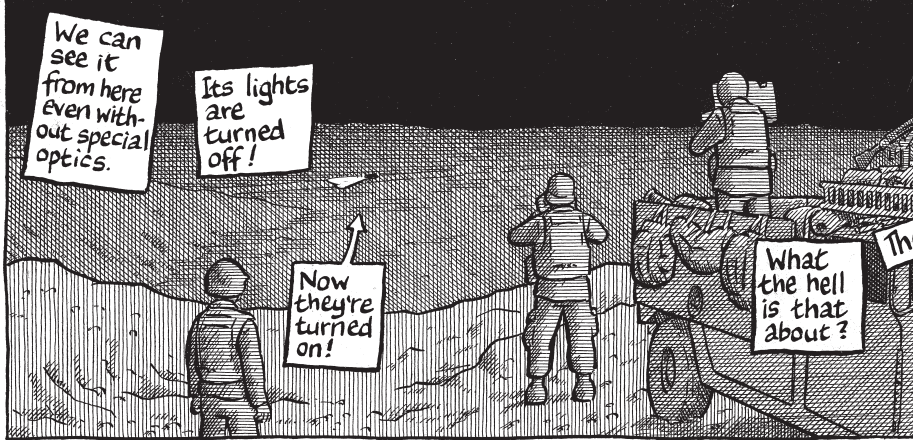
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MAP 2 returns to the desert to complete its watch. As night falls, Sgt. Cantu's crew is tensed up, and soon there is word of a car stopped nearby.



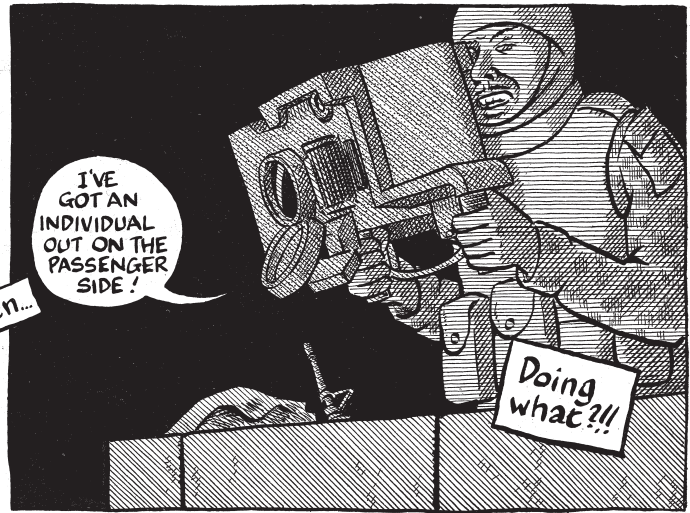
We can see it from here even without special optics.

Its lights are turned off!

Now they're turned on!

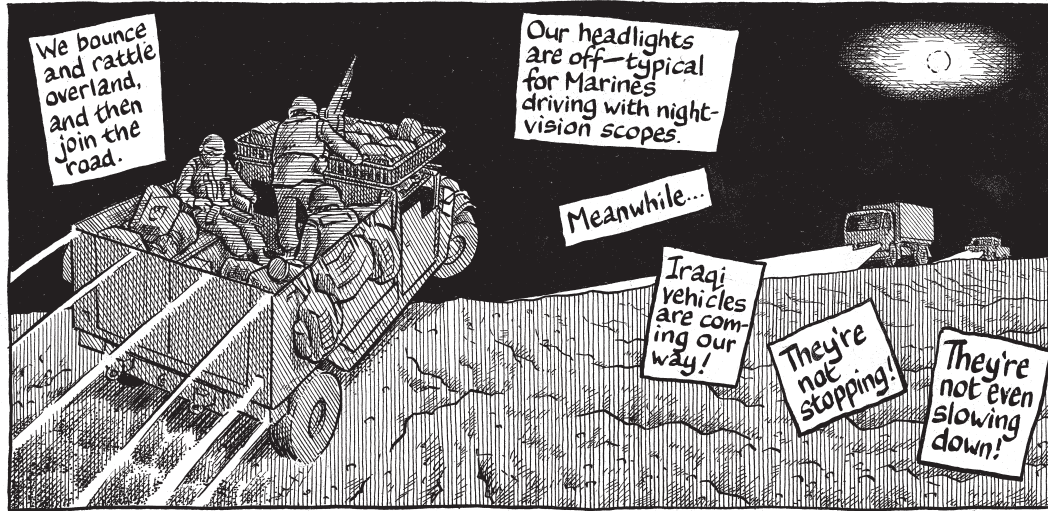
What the hell is that about?

Then...



I'VE GOT AN INDIVIDUAL OUT ON THE PASSENGER SIDE!

Doing what?!!



We bounce and rattle overland, and then join the road.

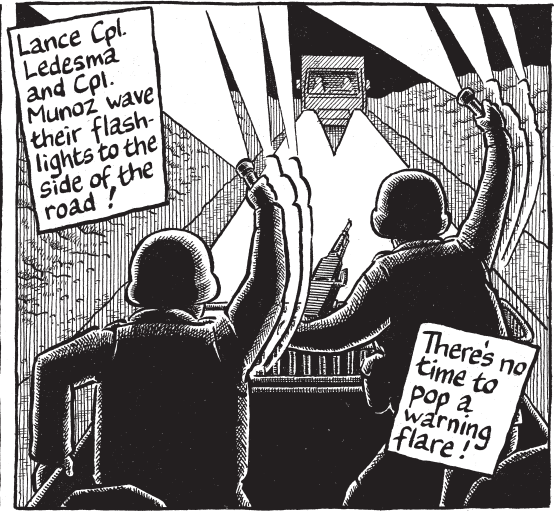
Our headlights are off—typical for Marines driving with night-vision scopes.

Meanwhile...

Iraqi vehicles are coming our way!

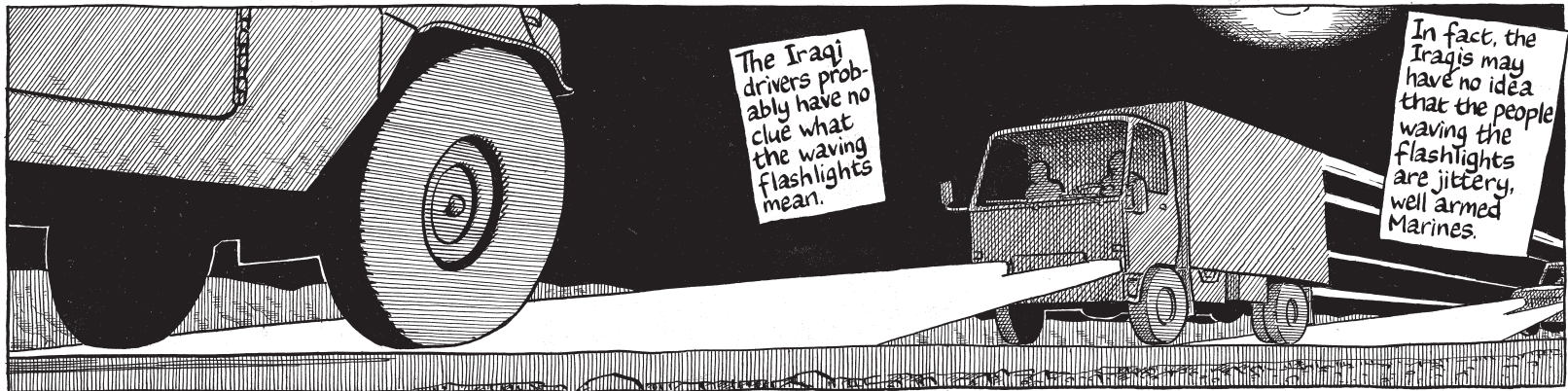
They're not stopping!

They're not even slowing down!



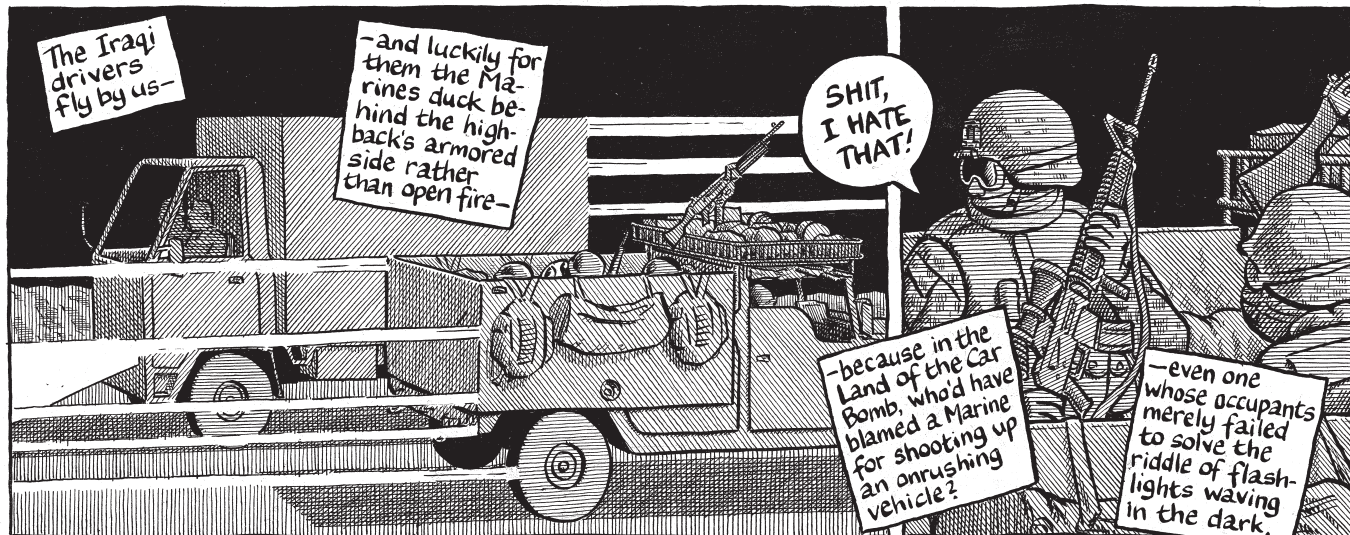
Lance Cpl. Ledesma and Cpl. Munoz wave their flashlights to the side of the road!

There's no time to pop a warning flare!



The Iraqi drivers probably have no clue what the waving flashlights mean.

In fact, the Iraqis may have no idea that the people waving the flashlights are jittery, well armed Marines.



The Iraqi drivers fly by us—

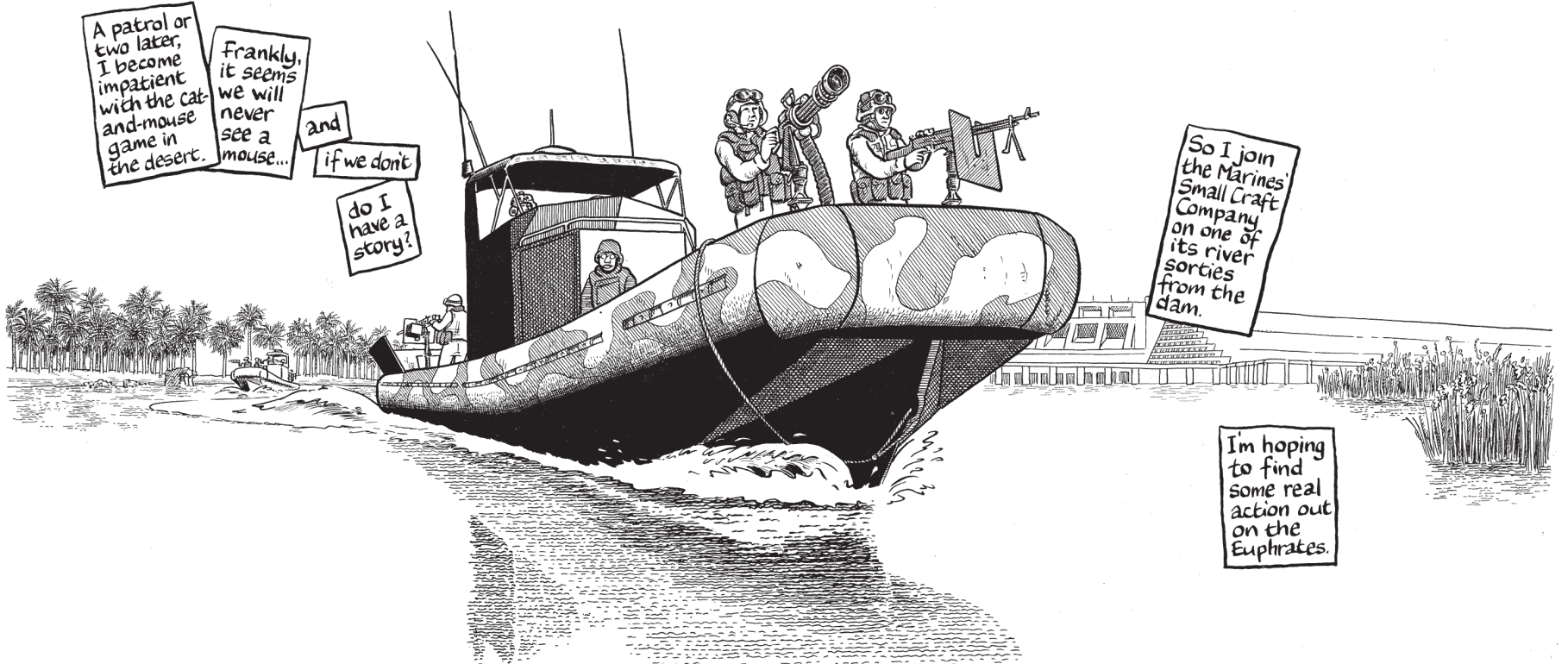
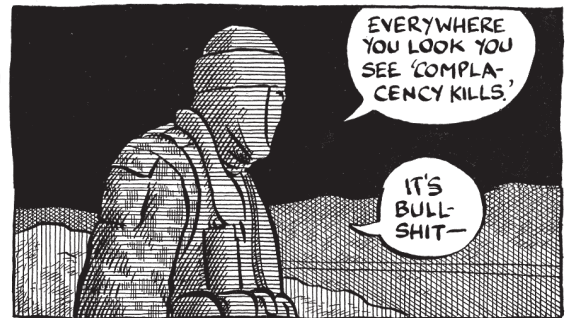
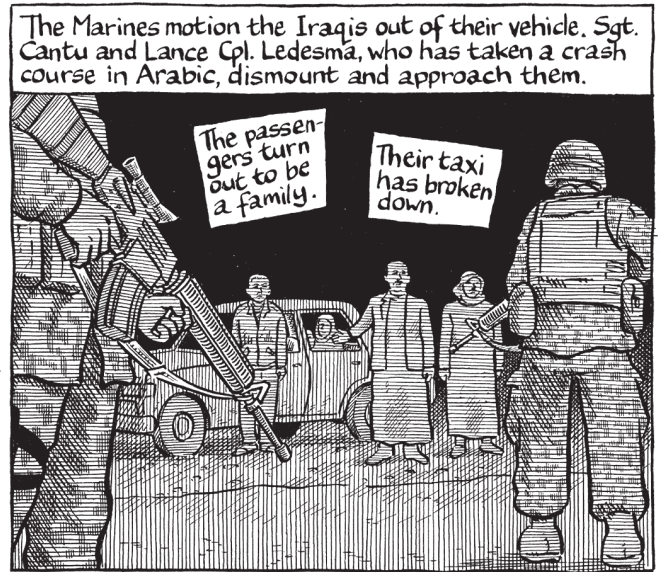
—and luckily for them the Marines duck behind the high-back's armored side rather than open fire—

SHIT, I HATE THAT!

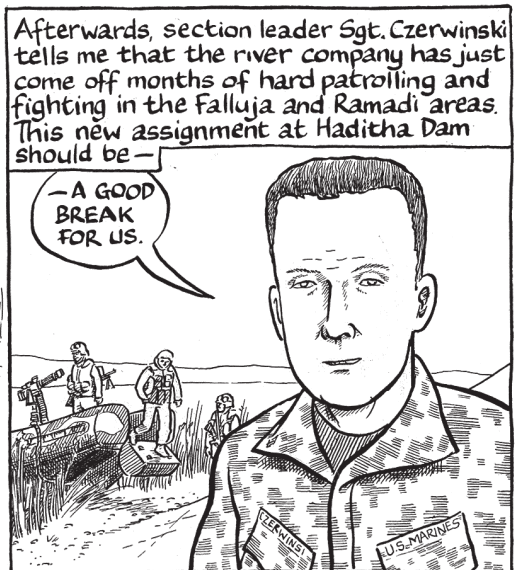
—because in the Land of the Car Bomb, who'd have blamed a Marine for shooting up an onrushing vehicle?

—even one whose occupants merely failed to solve the riddle of flashlights waving in the dark.

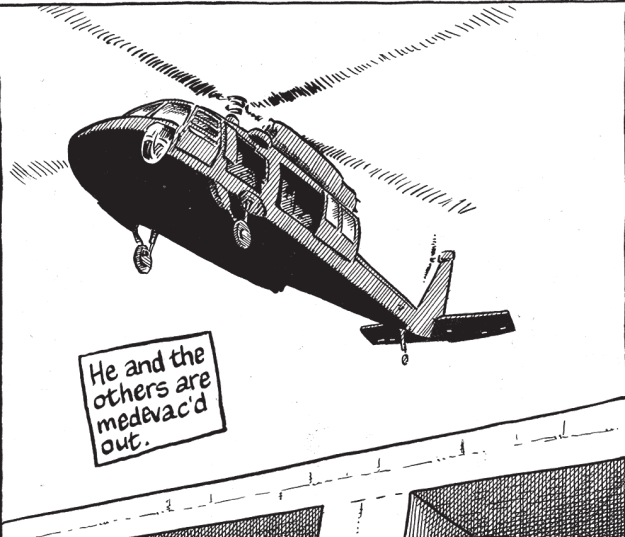
When Marines shoot innocent Iraqis, the battalion offers "salacia payments" of up to \$2,500 to the victim or the victim's family to express "sympathy, not liability," according to Major Coakley, the unit's Staff Judge Advocate. In its five months in Iraq, the battalion has made "no more than ten" such payments for civilian deaths, mostly involving people in cars who inadvertently ran Marine roadblocks.



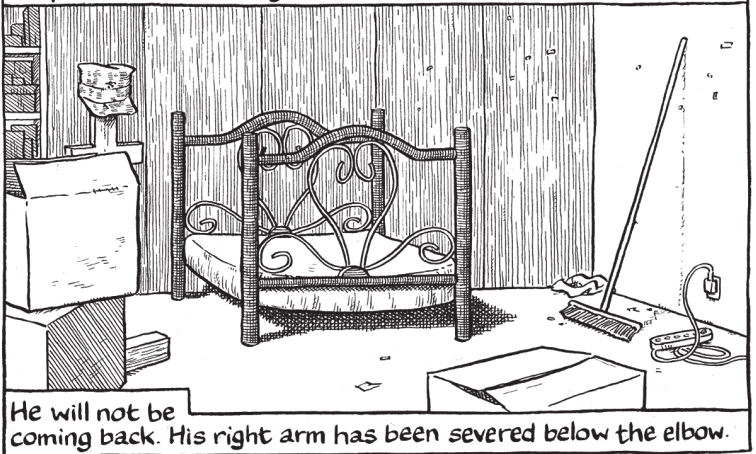
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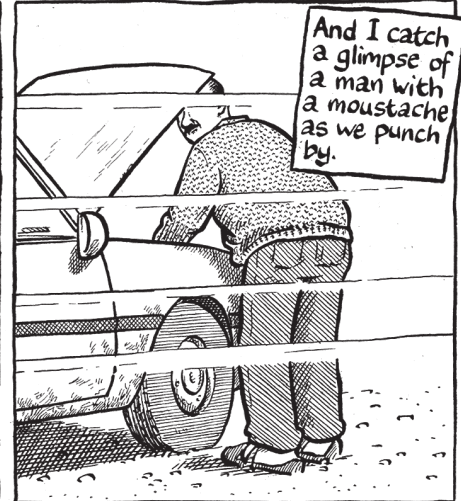
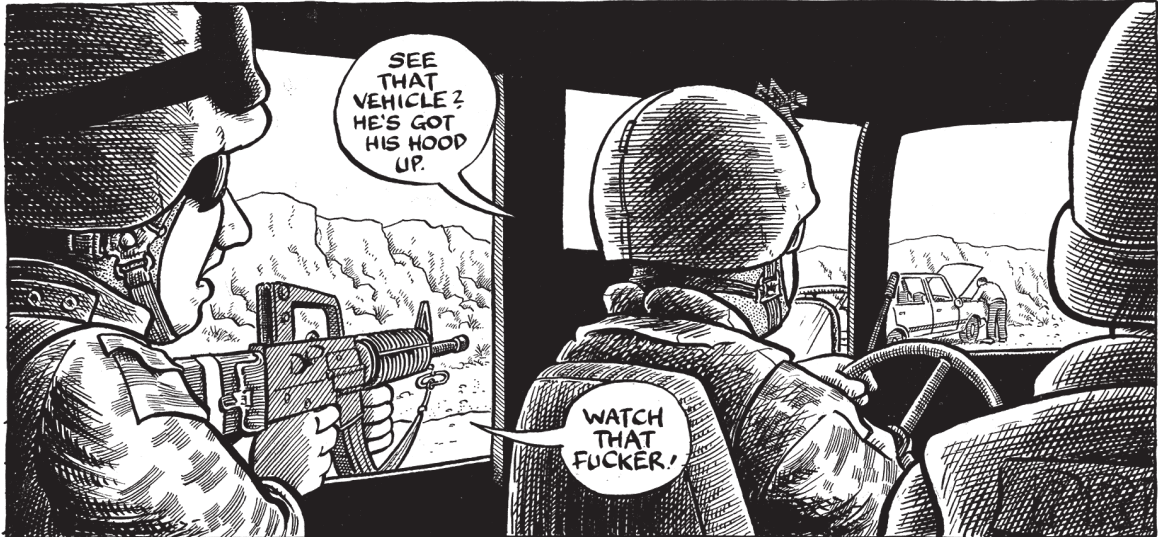
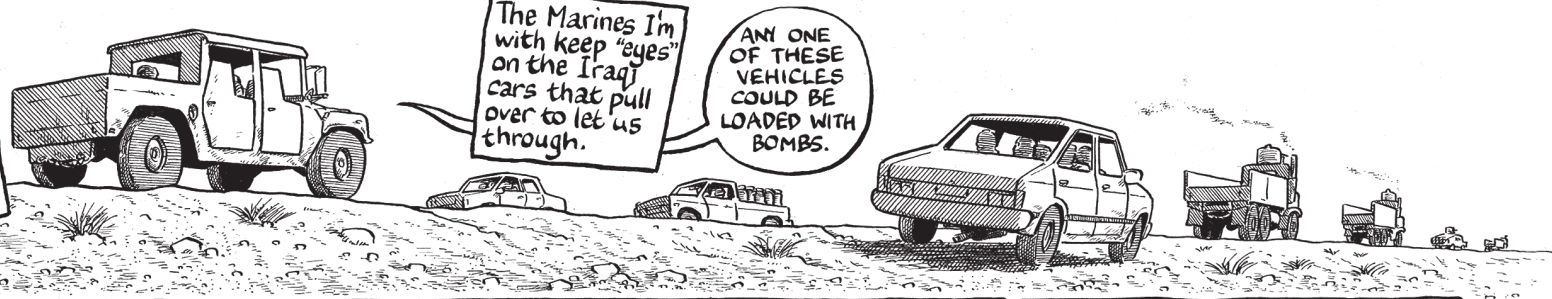
The next day, his unit is ambushed after landing on the river bank to investigate some small arms fire. Lance Cpl. Parrello, who piloted the boat I'd ridden on the day before, is killed. Three others are wounded, including Capt. Kuniholm, my coffee-drinking roommate at the dam, who had jumped on one of the boats on the spur of the moment.



Within hours, Capt. Kuniholm's 21 pairs of black socks, his four year old's drawings, and all his other items are packed up for shipment to his family in North Carolina.



A short time later, I leave Haditha Dam on a convoy bound for the Al Asad Air base.



WITHIN A MONTH OF MY LEAVING, THE MARINES OF 1/23 AND THEIR ATTACHED UNITS SUFFERED SEVEN MORE FATALITIES.

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