

Caught Behind Iraqi Lines in Kuwait City

A missionary couple share the reality of life on the run in wartime.

by Tom Dybdahl



David Dunn stepped onto the tarmac of Andrews Air Force Base on December 10, 1990, 12 months after first arriving in Kuwait as an Adventist missionary. Two days before, he had been in Kuwait hiding from the Iraqi army. Waiting for Dunn was his wife, Elizabeth, and their two children. They had been allowed to leave occupied Kuwait three months earlier. The following interview was conducted and edited by Tom Dybdahl, an editor at Rodale Press and senior editor of Spectrum.

—The Editors

SPECTRUM: When and how did you decide to go to Kuwait?

DAVID DUNN: Our call to serve in the Middle East came during the summer of 1988. This appointment came, in part, out of planning done by the General Conference Global Strategies Committee. The plan, at first, was to find some way to enter an Islamic country that had no Adventists. Near the end of 1989 I was asked to serve as the Gulf section leader, headquartered in Kuwait.

SPECTRUM: What responsibilities did that include?

D. DUNN: I had three different emphases in my work. One was to pastor the 124-member Kuwait City church. I received a formal residence in Kuwait as a clergyman. That was unusual, because normally that pro-

cedure takes a long time. But in this case, what normally took a couple of months only took a couple of days.

The second emphasis was to be the leader of the Gulf section, which involved all of the countries down along the Arabian Gulf. In all of these countries there are Seventh-day Adventists, but they are not organized, so my task was to go down, find out who was there, who could lead, establish companies, and eventually churches.

The third emphasis was to study Arabic and Islam and to work with the Moslems. My interest was in the last one, but the areas demanding the most attention were the first two.

SPECTRUM: What was your living situation like in Kuwait?

ELIZABETH DUNN: The church in Kuwait City had been able to locate and rent a large, old villa. They had fixed up the ground floor for church and Sabbath school. Our family lived on the second floor. We had one guest room and three good-sized rooms plus a kitchen. The landing we turned into a living-room area. We also had air conditioning, and outside we had a walled-in courtyard.

D. DUNN: At the time when we started in Kuwait, it was one of the most affluent countries in the world. (It had a very high per capita income.) It had Pizza Huts and Baskin-Robbins

What form will Adventism take in the Middle East after the war? David Dunn thinks the Arab world will experience a liberation of policies, both economic and cultural. Adventism will have to run to catch up.

and Safeway shopping centers. Also, Kuwait was a very safe country to be in. You could leave your house unlocked without fear of being robbed. Security was very tight. You couldn't leave the country without clearance.

SPECTRUM: Did you feel restricted in terms of your preaching?

D. DUNN: Yes, there was some anxiety. Not so much from what I was saying. In what we spoke to our own church members—what we did within our walls—we basically had freedom to do what we wanted. Some Adventist members' agendas were different from mine. They were there to earn income and go back to their home countries. This issue became more sensitive when we began to work with non-Adventists. We say that we have churches in the Middle East. In Kuwait we had a transient meeting house where people came, but their focus was not on that congregation, especially in an evangelistic way. They did not want to identify themselves evangelistically. There was a small group of members, converted in the country,

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who were laborers, and who were beginning to show more interest in reaching out evangelistically.

SPECTRUM: From your experience, what was the first indication of the invasion?

E. DUNN: Dave had been traveling the whole month of July. When he returned, to enjoy some privacy as a family, we checked into the Holiday Inn, which is right near the airport. We went to bed and I woke up about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning and turned on the TV to see what we could find. The headline was, “Kuwait has been invaded.” The walls were so insulated from being near the airport that we hadn't heard a thing. Then we looked out the window and saw convoys of Iraqi tanks going by on their way to Saudi Arabia.

SPECTRUM: Would you have heard more if you had been at your house?

E. DUNN: Yes, because our house was closer to the Gulf, right along the Gulf Road where the Iraqis were lining up their tanks. So David decided around 10 o'clock that he was going to take the car and go see what was going on.

SPECTRUM: Were there checkpoints?

D. DUNN: Yes, but at first not in a formal fashion. There were Iraqi soldiers, but they were disoriented. They were thirsty. They wanted a ride from here to there. So they would flag you down and get in the car with you, and you would take them to their place. They would thank you and you would go on. Many soldiers didn't have any idea why they were even there. They thought they were on joint maneuvers with the Kuwaitis.

E. DUNN: David went to the American Embassy just about every other day to see if there was any reason why we should be worried.

D. DUNN: I drove right down in the very heart of where the fighting had been—the palace and the

Sheraton Hotel. I went down right through town. The Iraqis usually didn't hassle me at all.

SPECTRUM: When you talked to the people at the American Embassy, they didn't seem to feel that you should leave immediately?

D. DUNN: No, they told us to lie low. They told us to remain in the hotel. They didn't have any specific instructions.

E. DUNN: About a week later we decided to leave the hotel. Thursday morning we just packed our bags, and David went down and got the car. The hotel has rooms all around a large opening so you can see down. I could see down to the front door, and as soon as he had the car at the front door, I came down with the suitcases and we just left. We weren't going to risk any confrontations at that point with the hotel management.

D. DUNN: Soldiers had come in by this time and were occupying the top floors of the hotel.

SPECTRUM: At that point had you seen any looting?

D. DUNN: Yes. If anyone made an attempt to resist, he was killed. Shop owners were killed in front of their stores. There was rape. There were hostels of women who worked in the hospitals and hotels. These were broken into and the women raped.

E. DUNN: Most of those killed or raped were not Westerners. Most were Indians, Filipinos, and Arabs.

SPECTRUM: Was this very common?

D. DUNN: I would not say common. It wasn't happening all over the place all the time. By this time—about a week and a half later—an order had come out from the Iraqis that we were to meet at the hotel. I went down to the embassy and tried to get advice from them. They advised us not to go.

SPECTRUM: Why was that?

D. DUNN: Because they seemed to realize that if we did do such a

thing we would end up being sent to Baghdad. And the embassy had lost all touch with those people who had been taken to Baghdad. From that point on, we stayed inside. We had food and water. Our diet was simple but adequate.

E. DUNN: We had a 150-pound bag of rice. We had lentils and flour. Whenever someone came to visit us we had a shopping list made out and we would give them money. They would bring us whatever they could find. So we were pretty well stocked with food and goods and vegetables.

SPECTRUM: Did you go out at all?

E. DUNN: We would go out on the roof, mostly at night.

D. DUNN: There were soldiers on rooftops, but they didn't know we were in our house. We had construction paper pasted on the windows, so no light would come in or out. We kept a very, very low profile.

E. DUNN: When people visited us we didn't know how they were getting through the checkpoints which, at that point, were at both ends of our street. And we didn't know what they were telling the Iraqi soldiers. We were a little nervous that we would be given away. But we never were.

D. DUNN: After a couple of weeks the Kuwaiti resistance had kicked up. For the first two or three weeks the Kuwaitis were kind of expecting that America was going to come galloping in on a white horse and rescue them. And then the reality of the situation dawned—that it was going to drag on—and the Kuwaitis became more active with their resistance. There were regular gun-fights at night.

E. DUNN: The bullets went over our house. You could hear the bullets singing as they went by. There were bullet holes in the window and in the wall. A block away a tank was dug in. There was a cannon on the other side.

SPECTRUM: Mrs. Dunn, you were

able to leave in September?

E. DUNN: Saddam Hussein decided for some reason that he would let the Western women and children out. The British embassy came through with a bus convoy. The American embassy advice was, if you have a way to go, go. It would be just that much safer for David. So we debated and finally decided to go.

We left about 7 a.m., the first Tuesday in September. We got to Baghdad around midnight, and then spent two more hours on our bus. We drove around Baghdad before finding a hotel to put all 350 of us in, Wednesday morning. After we slept a little bit, we contacted the American embassy. They said there was a flight that afternoon, but we missed it by 15 minutes. The next day we got a flight to Turkey. On the runway we changed from the Iraqi plane and went on to a French-Canadian flight. They proceeded to douse us all in champagne and fly us to England.

SPECTRUM: During the day and a half you were in Baghdad, did it seem like a place under siege?

E. DUNN: In Baghdad I called the Adventist pastor. He came over with his wife, picked us up, brought us to the church, and fed us breakfast. He apologized for the state of the bread—very hard and very tough. He had had to wait in line longer than usual to get the bread. He also said there was no heat in Baghdad.

SPECTRUM: Basically there was food everywhere in Iraq?

E. DUNN: In Kuwait we had seen trucks loaded with household and office supplies heading for Baghdad. That is what I saw in the street corners in Baghdad—all this stuff for sale. In fact, the Adventist pastor and his family had been out shopping that morning for things from Kuwait.

SPECTRUM: So, Pastor Dunn, you were left behind in September. What happened after that?

D. DUNN: The next day, another

American moved in to share the space with me. Our warden system linked me up with another person who was alone, living right next to the Gulf Road where most of the action was. So he moved to where I was. We kept our visibility down. Every time one of our great Western celebrities came over to Baghdad and got a handful of hostages, the Iraqis compensated by grabbing more of us in the next 24 hours. One morning about 5 o'clock, across the street from us, 20 police cars and trucks full of troops sealed off the whole area and searched for Westerners. We watched from my house as the Iraqis rounded up 12 foreigners. I could see all of this happening. On my side of the highway there was more random looting. Another day a census was taken by the Iraqis, going on both sides of the highway, but they never stopped at my door.

SPECTRUM: Were you in any danger?

D. DUNN: Yes, some of my friends were captured and used as human shields. One was put in an ammunition factory. One fellow did not see the light of day for more than three months. Some people had very little to eat, but other people had everything they needed. I thought it was



better to stay in hiding because there were certain things you could control. You had your own food, your own resources. And in the case of an invasion, the likelihood was that Kuwait would be safer than Iraq.

SPECTRUM: As time passed, was there a growing sense that you needed to do something?

D. DUNN: Yes. By November 21 I hadn't been out of my house for three months. Then some British people who were four houses down from me invited me to their home for Thanksgiving dinner. I was alone and there were three of them. Rather than become vulnerable in the light of day, I went on Wednesday evening. Thursday morning there was a big gun battle in the street in front of our houses and, of course, we went into hiding.

All of us in hiding had developed secret places. We had false walls built up. We had sewage manholes that we would hide in, or air conditioning ducts. When the shoot-

The Iraqis went to Kuwaiti homes randomly in the early morning hours, yanked people out, and shot them in cold blood—five Kuwaitis for every Iraqi soldier who was killed.

ing would go off, we would hide, because usually after that there would be house-to-house searches. After things had been quiet for a couple of hours, we came out, prepared our meal, and had a lovely day.

When it became dark again, I returned Thanksgiving night to my home and found that the only day that I had left my apartment the soldiers had come and taken anything of value, including all my personal documents. Probably what happened was that some Iraqi soldiers happened to jump over the wall for protection in the gun battle, and then realized that they had hit a jackpot. They took what they could carry and came back and trashed the place.

SPECTRUM: Did they take the food as well?

D. DUNN: Some of the food. Not the very heavy items. I took a small bag of clothes and slowly made my way back to my friend's house. The next day the Kuwaiti resistance relocated me in another flat that had already been trashed, so the likelihood of the Iraqis returning was pretty slim.

SPECTRUM: When you went out, you went at night. Did you just walk out in the street?

D. DUNN: I did wander out in the street quite boldly. I had been making plans to escape as an Indian, so I had already dyed my hair and changed the color of my skin. I had grown a mustache. The British were much bolder than the Americans. Of course, there were a lot more British living in Kuwait, so there were 400 British hostages and only 120 Americans.

SPECTRUM: It doesn't seem as though the Iraqis were really desperate to find all the foreigners.

D. DUNN: They did house-to-house searches in selected areas. Even then they were careless. It was almost as if they wanted us to escape. One American didn't have

time to find his secret hiding place, so he slipped around the bathroom door. He was about 6'4" and weighed about 220 pounds. The soldier opened the door. He was standing behind it. His toes were coming out from under the door and the Iraqi soldier just looked and said, "No one is in here." And he walked right on by.

Another time, there were three Americans in a flat. They had been pointed out. The Iraqi soldiers said, "OK, get your things." Two of the guys were living in one bedroom and another guy was living in the other. So the two guys went into their room. One guy crawled under the bed before the soldier entered. The second guy, walking around the room packing his things, sang a song: "Your feet are sticking out from under the bed." Then when he moved and his arm went out, "Your arm is sticking out." And all this time the Iraqi soldier was standing there with his gun, nonchalantly touching things here and there.

One American lived in his air conditioning duct for 23 days. He was a man who was involved with the Hawk missile system. He had been involved with the military on the morning of the invasion and had been involved in shooting down aircraft. He had his small dog with him. The little dog was usually a yappy thing, but it didn't let out a peep for 23 days. The man found six cases of wine and he and the dog drank themselves into oblivion.

SPECTRUM: After this Thanksgiving incident, you said that a Kuwaiti group helped you find a place. What group was that? Was there an organized resistance?

D. DUNN: Yes, in the area where I was living, the Kuwaitis killed a couple of Iraqi soldiers. The Iraqis then went to the Kuwaiti homes randomly in the early hours of the morning, yanked people out of their homes, and shot them in cold

blood—five Kuwaitis for every Iraqi soldier who was killed.

SPECTRUM: If they had found Westerners, would they have killed them?

D. DUNN: I myself did not hear of such cases. Once, they followed a Syrian-Kuwaiti who was involved in the resistance in helping to relocate Americans. The Iraqi soldiers then came with the Syrian-Kuwaiti into the American's apartment and put a gun to the Syrian-Kuwaiti's head and asked the American, "Do you want me to kill him now or later?" Later, they took the American away and we attempted to find this Syrian-Kuwaiti. He had been killed. Anyone who was involved in hiding Westerners or providing us food was killed.

SPECTRUM: By this time, were you thinking more about other ways to get out?

D. DUNN: Yes. We were collecting things for desert travel. Other people had purchased boats and

were making contacts with the Iraqi soldiers who were positioned along the coast. They hoped to buy them off and arrange something so that perhaps a dozen of us could get out by boat.

SPECTRUM: But then what happened?

D. DUNN: On Thursday, Hussein said we would be allowed to leave. Saturday, we got word from the embassy that it was OK to go out on the street. They had assurances from Iraqi forces that we would not be harassed. We started popping out from almost everywhere. We just felt so good to be free. We drove into the city. Their checkpoints didn't know what to do with us Westerners. They looked shocked.

SPECTRUM: When did you leave?

D. DUNN: At 2:30 in the afternoon we left Kuwait City and flew into Baghdad. When we finally boarded another plane, around 8:30 that evening, it turned out to be another Iraqi flight. We hung an American

flag at the front of our cabin. Even the Iraqi stewardesses and pilot got caught up in the spirit. They were very, very hospitable.

SPECTRUM: Looking back, how does this experience seem?

D. DUNN: When you are in the midst of the crisis and it is terrible, your mind blocks out the horror. It is the anxiety of the unknown that is strange. On the other hand, I felt God had called me there. I kept thinking that I had not accomplished my mission there. I never gave up hope to the extent that I said, "Well, this is finished." God had allowed my family to leave safely and had protected me. I had to learn to get along with myself. That was really hard.

E. DUNN: You gain confidence that you are in God's hands, that you are doing the right thing and you don't have to worry. When I would get uptight, or if I would start saying, "We really don't know what is going to happen," the boys would say,

Adventists in the Gulf

In Iraq

Dunn says that, as of January 16, 1991, the approximately 250 Adventists in Iraq, and their two church buildings, were unharmed by allied bombing. There are two congregations—one in Baghdad and one in the northern city of Mosul. For 50 years, up to the present, the Hasso family has led the Adventist church in Iraq. From Kurdish roots around Mosul in the north, the family continues to be among Iraq's most prominent retail merchants, particularly in Baghdad. They provided much of the financial support for establishing Middle East College in Beirut, Lebanon. Members of the family, and their in-laws, have also been denominational leaders throughout the Middle East.

Among the Allied Forces

The Defense Department estimates that one-half of one percent of all U.S. military personnel are Seventh-day Adventists. Based on this figure, the General Conference Adventist Chaplaincy Ministry assumes between 2,000 and 2,500 of the 500,000 U.S. troops in the Gulf War were Adventists. Of course, the United States now has a completely voluntary armed forces, so these Adventists chose to join the American military. It is possible to volunteer for non-combatant roles in the U.S. military, such as careers in health care, but there is a long waiting list for these jobs. Conversely, volunteers declaring that they are willing to serve in combat receive cash bonuses that sometimes

reach \$9,000. One Adventist military chaplain estimates that 90 percent of the Adventists in the U.S. military—including, presumably, those in the Gulf—are combatants bearing arms.

The Chaplaincy Ministries says that 16 of the 47 Adventist chaplains in the U.S. military, by February 16, were on assignment in the Gulf. They serve Christians of any denomination in all services—the Air Force and Army in Saudi Arabia, and the Navy (including the Marine Corps) on board ships in the Gulf. The number of Adventist chaplains serving in the U.S. military is proportionally higher than the percentage of Adventists in either the U.S. military or the American population.

"Well, Mommy, what is wrong? Jesus is with Daddy." Their faith was, of course, much greater than mine.

D. DUNN: I did think God's timing was kind of bad. I was ready a lot sooner than He was. When Thanksgiving went by, that was hard. And then I didn't even anticipate Christmas. I said, "I am not going to set myself up for that."

SPECTRUM: What do you think the implications of this event are for the Gulf area?

D. DUNN: The Arab world is rapidly changing. I see Kuwait coming out of this probably more open and more democratic. They will experiment with democracy, and it will be at the cutting edge of the new Arabic identity. There will be liberation of policies, both economically and culturally.

SPECTRUM: Do you think that, in a way, this crisis really could have a positive effect on the future of the Adventist Church?

D. DUNN: Yes. I think our biggest problem in the Gulf and in the Middle East is the status quo that has been maintained for the past 100 years by our church. At the beginning of the 1900s there was a much different Middle East than what you

have today. Twenty-five or 40 years ago the essence of Kuwait was camels and tents. Now, Kuwait City is one of the most advanced cities in the world.

But we have been very slow to attempt new methods or to fine-tune old methods to meet local needs. We have tended to orient ourselves toward larger institutions, rather than meeting the people at their level, one-on-one. We have become dependent on machinery. I think we need to turn to a style of missions where an individual Adventist—maybe a lay person—moves into a community, meets some of the needs of the community, identifies with people where they are.



Adventist colleges, at least when I was around them, didn't give much direction in that regard, saying, "Well, we are going to need five Adventist laymen in the Gulf, or Tibet, or Albania." I would suggest that young people plan their careers with missions in mind. There are many very high-paying, very interesting, exotic, exciting, adventurous jobs in the Middle East. Adventists in those jobs would have an impact on the mission of our church, plus be personally and professionally rewarded.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, rather than looking ahead to meet the needs and the situations that we are facing now, a lot of energy is being spent on trying to re-create some sentimental emotion of what we had at one time. I am not saying that I am on a different course than the leadership. When we get together and talk these things out, we are in unity. But when we get out into the field, there's such a gap between what's been said and what is happening.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a church that is based upon missions. We get our lifeblood from missions. That's why I think some changes need to be made.