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## Contractor says final goodbyes amid Iraq siege

### Charlotte man's job goes from fun to frightful as militants move in

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David Stokes was sure this would be the last time he ever called home.

His compound in the Iraqi town of Kut was under siege by 300 black-clad militants firing mortar rounds and machine guns.

He called his home in south Charlotte and got the answering machine. How do you say goodbye forever to your wife?

"Things are pretty rough here," the 32-year-old started off. His voice sounded tense, exhausted.

"We've been under attack all day. We've taken a lot of fire. I just wanted to call and let you know that if this doesn't work out, I love you, and Olivia and McCarver," Stokes said, talking about their 4-year-old daughter and 3-month-old son.

"Take care. I love you."

Stokes isn't a soldier. He wasn't in Iraq to fight or keep the peace.

He's one of an estimated 70,000 civilian employees hired by American companies -- including at least half a dozen firms in the Carolinas -- and sent to Iraq to do a job, with the promise of big paychecks for both the companies and their workers.

But more and more, these civilian employees find themselves in situations as dangerous as anyone in the military.

At least 39 contractors have been killed in Iraq, and more than 20 taken captive by militants in recent weeks, according to news reports. Two hundred or so have been wounded in the year since President Bush declared that the major fighting was over and the rebuilding could begin.

Stokes made his phone call on April 6, less than a week after four private security guards from Blackwater USA, a northeastern North Carolina company, were killed and mutilated 80 miles away in Fallujah, two of their charred corpses strung up for all the world to see.

Then on April 9, Iraqi militants attacked a Halliburton convoy, killing five civilians, two U.S. soldiers and kidnapping a driver. They vowed to kill him if American troops don't leave the city of Fallujah. He's still missing.

The mutilations in Fallujah were fresh in Stokes' mind as Iraqi militants laid siege to his compound, he said. In the deadliest month for U.S. troops since the war began (136 servicemen died in April), the battle for Kut is a little-known story that Stokes and his fellow civilian employees narrowly escaped to tell.

The calling

Stokes took a job in Iraq for the same reason most people do: He needed the work.

He lost his sales job when his company restructured last year. Through contacts with friends from the Virginia Military Institute, where Stokes went to college, he heard that Kellogg, Brown & Root was hiring.

The Houston-based company is a subsidiary of Halliburton, where Vice President Dick Cheney used to be CEO.

It sounded exciting and glamorous, so Stokes sent his resume. A recruiter called and offered him a job. The drawback: He'd be working in Iraq.

Stokes talked it over with his pregnant wife, Clara, and said no. The money was good -- the baseline salary for a KBR employee in Iraq is \$80,000, tax-free, and many make well over \$100,000 a year -- but they both said it seemed too risky and too far.

A week or so later, though, Stokes remembers, he woke up out of a deep sleep and realized he needed to do this. It was a calling, he said. Clara understood, and Stokes called the recruiter back to say he'd take the job.

He went to Houston in October for training. The instructors made the dangers plain, he said.

Four hundred people showed up for his group. Only 200 or so stayed.

Most KBR employees work on military bases, driving trucks, washing clothes and cooking meals for soldiers. Stokes, though, was assigned to a civilian site, working for the Coalition Provisional Authority -- the temporary Iraqi government.

He was sent to Kut, a city of 300,000 in southern Iraq that had seen very little fighting since U.S. Marines captured it last spring. The coalition had turned the region over to the Ukrainian military, which had set up in an abandoned Iraqi airbase.

The coalition government took over a former Baath Party compound that bordered the Tigris River. Several two-story buildings became their offices. Local work crews built walls around the compound, which included a hotel in need of renovation and guard towers that provided a good view of the town.

About 80 Americans, Brits, Poles and others lived and worked in the compound, including the regional governor and his staff. Stokes' job was to take care of their needs, he said. As KBR's site manager, he supervised three other KBR employees and subcontracted a lot of the work -- construction, trash removal, translation -- to local Iraqis.

Sixteen-hour days weren't unusual. He got to know several members of the Iraqi work crew who came to the compound every day. He gained respect for their resourcefulness and learned to like the local food (the main lunch choices, he recalls, were rice and chicken or chicken and rice).

He discovered that his main translator, Ajeel Musa, had studied English lit in Baghdad. That was Stokes' major at VMI. So he had his wife send over books and they started a literature club, reading Tennyson after work.

It was the most fun he's ever had drawing a paycheck.

## The warnings

Kut was peaceful for most of his six months there, Stokes said. The only danger came from the locals shooting their guns in the air to celebrate the end of a holy week or Saddam Hussein's capture. Stokes carries a dented bullet he picked up after the Saddam celebration as a good-luck charm.

But everything changed early last month, after the Blackwater employees were killed.

The U.S. military had shut down the newspaper of Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric with thousands of followers in southern Iraq.

Al-Sadr called on Shiites to strike back and fight the occupation. The whole country was tense, Stokes recalls.

On April 4, the Coalition Provisional Authority later reported, demonstrators gathered in Kut and Najaf. About 1,500 agitated Iraqis outside the Kut compound chanted, "We will die for Sadr!" They stayed for hours.

It was close to 100 degrees. Stokes and the other KBR employees went up on a roof and watched with binoculars. Everybody was sweating, Stokes said, expecting something bad to happen. But nothing did.

The next day, only about 15 of Stokes' Iraqi employees came to work, instead of the usual 70 or so. He said the public park next to the compound, normally full of soccer players, was empty. From the guard towers, the Ukrainians could see people in town carrying AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

On the morning of April 6, the civilian head of U.S. security told everybody he expected an attack, Stokes said. He told them to put on their helmets and bulletproof vests. Stokes sent his Iraqi employees home.

Two wanted him to leave with them. They said they could protect him. He recalls shaking their hands goodbye. Their grips were extra firm, and their worried gazes held his. He could tell they never expected to see him again.

## The uprising

Stokes and the three other KBR employees were in their small office around lunchtime when the attack came, he said. Their radios crackled with shouting in Ukrainian. They could hear shooting at the gates and guard towers.

Stokes said he and his friends threw necessities into a "bug-out bag." They shredded important documents and disabled critical systems, expecting to be overrun. About 30 Ukrainian and civilian guards tried to fight off 300 or so determined attackers.

The KBR employees spent most of the afternoon in their office, listening to the fighting over their radios and sending updates to headquarters as their building shook. More than 100 mortar rounds and shells rained into their compound that day.

A Chevy Suburban was hit, exploding in flames. A shell crashed through the roof of the KBR building, taking out the water storage tank and flooding their office. Stokes said they had to run and take refuge in the hotel at their compound, along with a few dozen other civilians from the interim government.

Someone nicknamed it the "Al Kut Alamo."

Stokes and his friends had never seen combat. They didn't carry weapons in Iraq. But as the day wore on and the guards needed ammunition, or bottled water, or MREs, they ran out into the firefight, Stokes said, rushing supplies to their protectors while snipers took aim at them.

About 10 p.m., after an entire afternoon and evening under attack, the head of the civilian security force -- a former Delta Force commando with 18 years experience -- checked in with Stokes and the other civilians in the hotel.

Have you called your wife? Stokes recalls the commander asking.

Stokes said he didn't want to worry her. He said he remembers thinking that the situation couldn't really be that dire.

I just hung up with mine, the commander said.

Stokes made the call.

The escape

He got the machine. It was shortly after noon in Charlotte and Clara Stokes was working at Loaves & Fishes. She does public relations for the charity.

So Stokes left his goodbye message. Clara arrived home about 10 minutes later, picked up the phone and listened to the message. She said she broke into a sweat and tried to call back. But Stokes had turned off his satellite phone to save the batteries.

So she called her parents, her family, friends, everyone. They did the only thing they could.

They prayed.

In Kut, Stokes did the same while huddled in the hotel with his friends, hoping for help. Their guards had started the morning with 10,000 rounds of ammo. They were down to 1,500 for the 30 or so defenders.

Stokes and friends heard U.S. special forces were on the way, then they weren't. An evacuation by air was planned from the roof, then called off. Finally, about 1:30 a.m., they heard the most wonderful sound in the world.

The whipping rotors of two Apache helicopters.

The attackers backed off after that. The Apaches and an AC-130 gunship pounded the Iraqi town with softball-sized rounds.

The civilians and guards loaded everything into the surviving military trucks and SUVs. At sunrise, with every gun they had pointed out the windows and the Apache helicopters flying low above them, the mismatched convoy took off into the desert.

Two hours later, they were at the Ukrainian airbase, safe at last. Newspapers later reported that a private guard from a British security company and a Ukrainian soldier had been killed in the Kut fighting that day.

U.S. Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt would later say at a media briefing in Baghdad that militants had taken over the coalition compound, the Iraqi police station and other government buildings.

"We had Sadr's militia running rampant through al Kut," he said.

At the airfield, Stokes was given a message to call KBR headquarters in Baghdad. Can I call my wife first? he asked.

It was after midnight in Charlotte. Clara said she thanked God when she heard her husband's voice -- in person, alive and safe.

Stokes was flown to Baghdad to rest. He said KBR agreed to send him home to see his wife and kids, but they wanted him to come back and take another job in Iraq.

He said he'd love to keep working for the company, but not there. Clara sent an e-mail, asking him to come home. The risk is intolerable, she said. It's not good for the family anymore.

"I'm not going back to Iraq," Stokes said. "I'm not doing that to my wife, my family."

The company gave him a 30-day leave to find a new job in the States, he said. On April 21, he landed in Charlotte to a home covered with yellow balloons and ribbons.

He's ecstatic to be back, but heartbroken at how he left Kut. He'd had plans for his last day -- taking his Iraqi workers out for a big lunch, exchanging gifts and proper goodbyes.

"This is not the way I wanted to go out," he said. "There's this feeling of failure that we were unable to accomplish our mission.

"But if one of those guys remembers that an American was nice to him, and that someday down the road prevents him or his children from doing something bad to us, it's been worth it."

His goodbye message is still on the answering machine. Clara hasn't listened to it since that day. Stokes hasn't listened to it at all. He doesn't want to.

He's got enough bad memories without it.

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## **Kut's Fate**

The Ukrainian military withdrew its 1,100 troops from Kut on April 7, according to news reports.

Briefing reporters in Baghdad the next day, U.S. Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez confirmed the coalition had lost control of Kut, which U.S. Marines had first taken a year before.

David Stokes' description of the attack was echoed in a report from the Ukrainian Embassy in London, which said a Ukrainian unit held its position at the coalition compound in Kut under fierce mortar and infantry attacks for almost 13 hours.

In an e-mail message, one of Stokes' co-workers in Kut, still working for Kellogg, Brown & Root in Iraq, also confirmed Stokes' description of that day's events.

KBR declined to comment for this story, citing company policy.

On April 8, a force of about 1,000 U.S. soldiers reached Kut from Najaf. The 1st Armored Division soldiers described the fighting to a Knight Ridder reporter as their fiercest in months.

It took three days of combined air, armor and ground assaults to retake the city, according to news reports. U.S. forces captured or wounded 230 of an estimated 400 to 500 militiamen who had overrun the coalition compound and other government buildings.

A week after the initial attack, on April 13, the deputy Coalition Provisional Authority administrator and 16 members of his staff were able to return. Fighting continues periodically to root out remnants of the militia, but they no longer control any part of the town.