



## All Routes Are Amber: A Soldier's Experience in the Iraq War

**Martin F. Swirko**

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*Covering a soldier's service in Iraq in a point-by-point manner, All Routes Are Amber is an illuminating memoir.*

Martin F. Swirko's candid memoir *All Routes Are Amber* chronicles his military service during the Iraq War.

Swirko, who began his military career in the US Army Reserves in the 1980s, volunteered for active duty early in the Iraq War, seeking to prove his mettle. He left civilian life and his family behind to serve as an embedded advisor with an Iraqi battalion. The book also looks back on his previous service record.

This book's recollection of Swirko's service in Iraq moves in a point-by-point manner. Deployed from Fort Carson, he was sent to the war's staging ground in Kuwait; next, he landed in Iraq, where troops faced cultural and logistical challenges. Insurgents were believed to have infiltrated the Iraqi forces, and hypervigilance was required. The book also covers conditions like spartan barracks, mediocre dining-hall food, and the lack of sleep and creature comforts; Swirko quips that "the only good thing about that 6AM block of instruction was having breakfast when we were done."

The book evades depth in its coverage, though. Criticisms related to the war are referenced in an offhand, incidental way, treated as ominous and far-fetched. Still, there's a sense of apprehension in recollections of hearing distant firefights, and Swirko's admissions that he faced physical limitations because of his age are humanizing. The struggles he faced after returning home are also covered with humility.

Peppered with light profanity, the prose is down to earth. Its regular use of military slang is situating, and its battlefield tales are gritty. It is prone to awkward analogies, though: A captain is said to have issued misery like equipment; the dispersal of ammunition is compared to a grandfather handing out candy to his grandchildren.

Dense and detailed, the book moves at a dragging pace. Its momentum is often lost in minutiae, retracing steps, conversations, and rifle specifications until it becomes a mass of undifferentiated details. It meanders through subjects including M4 carbines, impeding the excitement of tales about accidental discharges and the like. Indeed, its close observations of topics like the quality of native latrines, the fineness of Iraqi sand, and events to keep up morale deplete its energy. Its musings on subjects like the public health effects of the amount of sugar in Iraqi tea and fast-paced operational tempos are surface level and trailing.

A revealing soldier's memoir, *All Routes Are Amber* looks back on wartime service, asking what it meant.

JOSEPH S. PETE (March 5, 2026)

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