

Traveling on Sniper Alley

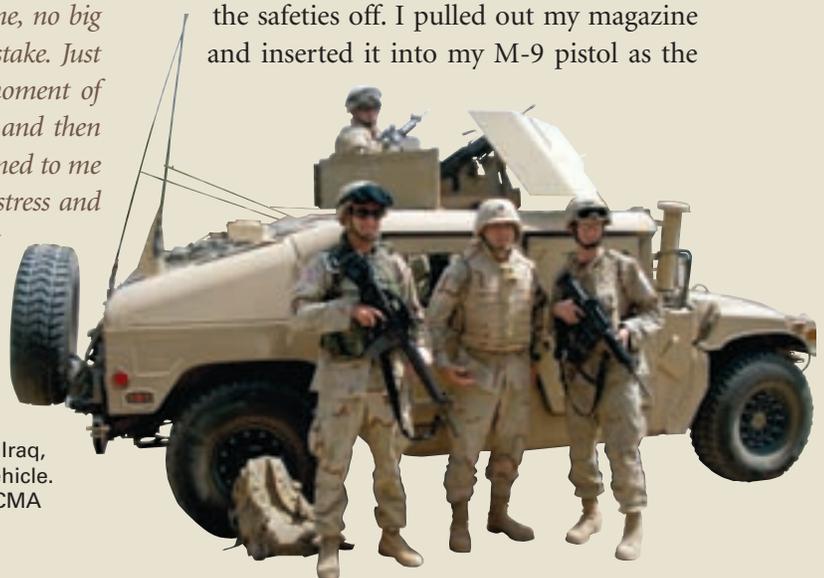
by Lt. Col. Bradley Fishel, U.S. Air Force, Commander,
DCMA Joint Contracting Command Iraq



Over the past several years, I've been playing baseball in San Antonio and Orlando, Fla. I play various positions in the infield (second base, third base and shortstop), and there have been times when I've been afflicted with "Steve Sax¹/Chuck Knoblauch²" disease. For those of you who don't know the sport, this is a mental block caused by thinking too much, stressing about the throw and not wanting to mess up the play in order to avoid letting teammates down. It affects the best of baseball players at times, rendering them unable to throw the ball with accuracy, even short distances. The ball just doesn't go where you want it to. Whenever this problem afflicted me, my teammates would tell me, "It's just a throw. When you warm up before a game, you make it 100 times without error," and, "It's just a game, no big deal — don't worry about making a mistake. Just throw the ball." But the stress at that moment of the game causes you to think too much, and then you're done. You throw it away. It's happened to me countless times in the past — too much stress and adrenaline fueling my desire to be perfect in a game that I believe is important. Being exposed to real stress during my time in Baghdad, Iraq, however, put my sports ailments in perspective.

(Top) Looking out at the streets of Baghdad, Iraq, from the back of a personal security detail vehicle. Standing to the right are Iraqi policemen. (DCMA staff photo)

July 2005 — I was on the stretch of highway between Baghdad International Airport and the Green Zone (known as Sniper Alley and Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device Alley) on a seven-vehicle convoy to Abu Ghraib, Iraq, to see one of my troops. As we pulled out of the International Zone and into the Red Zone³ in our Humvees, my heart began to race. Jake, a 20-year-old Army corporal on the .50-caliber machine gun, was assigned to the turret. The second lieutenant who was leading the convoy had led many already in his short career, and he began authoritatively barking to his team, "Go red, go red!" meaning load the weapons and take the safeties off. I pulled out my magazine and inserted it into my M-9 pistol as the



¹ Steve Sax played baseball for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1981-1988 seasons. In 1982 he won the National League Rookie of the Year Award, setting a Dodger rookie record with 49 stolen bases and leading the club with 638 at-bats, 88 runs and 180 hits. In 1983, he mysteriously became unable to make throws to first base on easy plays. His batting ability remained strong, and a 25-game hitting streak in September 1986 brought him within two points of a batting title. He then played for the New York Yankees from 1989-1991, the Chicago White Sox from 1992-1993 and the Oakland Athletics in 1994.

Source: Tom Gallagher, *Steve Sax*, 2002, BaseballLibrary.com, 23 Aug. 2005, <http://www.baseballlibrary.com/baseballlibrary/ballplayers/S/Sax_Steve.stm>.

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remaining crew in my Humvee loaded their M-16 rifles.

The second lieutenant's driver called out the threats as they arose: "Vehicle — left side, Jake," to which there was an answering, *stomp, stomp*, as Jake acknowledged the direction by pounding his foot on the floor, bravely standing with his upper torso exposed out the top of the Humvee. Jake turned to cover the suspicious vehicle with his weapon. Another direction from the driver: "Overpass ahead, Jake." *Stomp, stomp*. Jake took tactical actions to cover his teammates in Humvees ahead as they passed under the bridge, ducking to avoid being hit by the bombs that are regularly dropped down on convoys from overpasses. After we went through the overpass, Jake sprung back up and covered his buddies behind as they went through. This went on for the next 60 minutes. Vehicles stopped, people walking, little kids playing — all were potential threats. The whole time my adrenaline was pumping as my eyes peered out from the Humvee's windows, looking for any indication that there was someone out there trying to kill me.

That is the bottom line here in Iraq: there are certain people who want to kill me for no other reason than that I have on a U.S. military uniform, or even simply because I'm an American. These people are willing to die to end my life. It's an everyday reality here — there are no second chances. Unlike baseball, there is no one here telling me, "It's OK," if I mess up. There is no one telling me, "It's just a game, no big deal — don't worry about making a mistake." Here, it's real. Now *that* is stress.

(Above) A front-seat view from a Humvee that is part of a personal security detachment making its way to Abu Ghraib, Iraq. Dozens of trips are made each day and, despite heavy precautions, casualties are high. (DCMA staff photo)
(Opposite) Air Force Lt. Col. Bradley Fishel, DCMA Joint Contracting Command Iraq commander (center), with two members of his personal security detachment (PSD). The PSD members wish not to be identified because they accompany coalition forces along Sniper Alley every day.

We have some of the best young men and women in the world dealing with this type of stress everyday to protect us from these people who want us dead. These military men and women are professionals, and they are my heroes.

After my 60-minute "joyride," we finally arrived at our warehouse at Abu Ghraib. Our mission was to meet with the prime contractor and the two DCMA quality assurance representatives to check in on the warehouse operations. The Abu Ghraib warehouse receives hundreds of shipments every day of items worth millions of dollars, ranging from ammunition to automobiles — items needed to sustain the mission here in Iraq.



Five hours later, we began the journey back to the International Zone, going through the same routine. When I got out of the Humvee, I shook the second lieutenant's hand and told him he had a good team. "They're wired tight and did a great job," I said. He shook my hand, saluted and said, "Thanks, Sir. We'll be out there again tomorrow."

I hope they all make it back to their husbands, wives, kids and friends, to their moms and dads, to their sisters and brothers. Some of them won't. However, you can bet these soldiers will be out there tomorrow, protecting you, protecting me and protecting our freedom. Under extreme stress, the members of our military are able to act, without allowing their anxiety to take over. Having witnessed this dedication to action, somehow I don't think I'll have any problems with that throw to first base anymore.

² Chuck Knoblauch played baseball for the Minnesota Twins in the 1991-1997 seasons and was an important part of the Twins' amazing transformation from last-place losers in 1990 to World Champions in 1991, the year in which he was named Rookie of the Year. In 1997 he won his first Gold Glove award for his fielding abilities. The next year he was traded to the New York Yankees, where he played in the 1998-2001 seasons. Midway through the 1998 season, the former Gold Glove developed a mental tic that caused him to hesitate after fielding the ball, often forcing him to make wild throws to first base, a problem reminiscent of Steve Sax's troubles a decade earlier. His league-leading 26 errors in 1999 were the most by any Yankee second baseman since 1945. He continued to experience throwing troubles through the 2000 season, when he was moved to a new position in left field.

Source: James G. Robinson, *Chuck Knoblauch*, 2002, BaseballLibrary.com, 23 Aug. 2005, <http://www.baseballlibrary.com/baseballlibrary/ballplayers/K/Knoblauch_Chuck.stm>.

³ A zone in Iraq in which the military cannot guarantee one's safety